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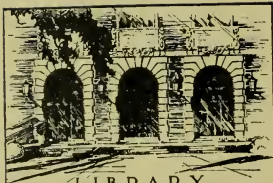
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JACK DOYLE'S DAUGHTER

BY

R. E. FRANCILLON

AUTHOR OF 'ROPES OF SAND' 'OLYMPIA' 'A DOG AND HIS SHADOW' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

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JACK DOYLE'S DAUGHTER

PART III—*continued*

MISS DOYLE

CHAPTER XXI

THE UP TRAIN

PHŒBE'S sense of relief on hearing the lodge gates close behind her, was for a while so great as to beggar description. During that one day she had lived a life, and nature could remain at full strain no longer. She had let herself hurry through her departure without a thought, as if she were a well-ordered machine in the hands of a quick and expert workman. She had time to think now of whence she had come, and of whither she was going. She might speculate as to what would be thought of her flight at the Hall,

and as to how she could possibly explain it coherently when she reached home. But then, for some hours of travel, she would have to face nothing ; and so she faced nothing. A healthy nature, when overworked, tries to set the balance right in the only sensible way, and simply refuses to work any more. The past weeks turned into a dream—the future was all a blank. But there were the few precious hours between the blank and the dream, during which action was happily impossible, and speculation vain. Phil had said he would put everything straight, and what he said he would do he mostly did, somehow. As to why, with his enemy in his power, he should hold his hand, that question required thinking out ; and her thoughts refused to move.

‘ Begging your pardon, miss,’ asked Mrs. Hassock, while the heavy fly lumbered along the high road, ‘ but is it very bad news you’ve heard ? ’

‘ I—I don’t know,’ said Phœbe with a start, and in a weary tone, for even this very natural question was a strain upon wits that positively refused to be strained any more. Indeed, she was on the point of adding, ‘ I

don't care,' and she would have added them, had not three words more been three words too many. 'All I know is I've got to go home.'

'Was he took very sudden, I wonder? Those heavy sort of gentlemen mostly are, and when they are they go bad, for not being used to be took, they don't know what to do. But never mind, miss. Being an Indian gentleman it's the liver, I dare say. And I got one of the servants to cut some sandwiches, so you mayn't get home empty. I'm glad they've caught that young man that took your things. He'll get seven years, I dare say, and he deserves it, if it's only because he might have cost me my character, and that's what I live by. They're all alike those valleys. They'll all pick your pocket sooner than look at you; and if they make up to you, 'tis only for what you've saved. I might have had a dozen if I'd liked, but I never could bear the tribe. Would you like a sandwich now, miss? seeing you've had no dinner, and aren't like to.'

She opened her reticule temptingly.

Phœbe had not thought of that. But, having fallen into a state of nature too simple to heed even the most elementary rules for

the behaviour of a heroine in trouble, she became aware of what everybody knows, though civilised people may be ashamed to own up to their knowledge, that the hardest bodily exercise does not make one half so heartily hungry as hard feeling, so long as the digestion is sound. She was really grateful for Mrs. Hassock's forethought, and ate a handsome allowance of sandwiches without remembering that she ought to merely compel herself to swallow a morsel of food, after much persuasion, to keep herself, for the sake of others, from falling ill. Having eaten, and drunk from a flask, also of Mrs. Hassock's providing, she felt better, and was able to take a somewhat more active view of the situation, though a rather more sleepy one.

Mrs. Hassock talked by fits and starts, and probably asked occasional questions, which Phœbe answered, probably, more or less at cross purposes. Her real conversation was held with the wheels of the fly, which creaked out questions and seemed to answer them for her. What could Phil really have meant after all? To part her from Stanislas, and to pay her lover's safety from Siberia and the knout as the price of the parting?

‘Oh,’ thought she, ‘if I must part from him to save him—why I will do that, even that! I will never see him again! I’ll never even write to him, I’ll never hear of him, I’ll never let him hear of me, or know where I am. I’ll never have anything more to do with him at all. Of course it will be a terrible sacrifice to make, and ought to leave me broken-hearted; but he will be safe, and I shall be free! Yes, I will give him up, entirely for his own sake; it wouldn’t be a sacrifice if I made it for my own. Another sandwich, Mrs. Hassock? Well, just one more, and then you had better finish them before we get to the train. I wonder what father will say to me, and what I shall say to him. Could I say——’

Dramatic fancy was on the point of spreading its many-coloured wings for a flight, but the first feathers felt the air suddenly cold, and folded themselves in again. She even blushed to herself, though she was in the dark, and, but for Mrs. Hassock, alone. Not conscience, and not reason, but some new instinct told her that coloured things were not for her father, and that Philip Nelson would understand their dramatic fitness so little as to

call them lies. Well, had he not himself said that he was not going to object to lies, in his own person, any more? And, if he had not, were his coarse and heavy-handed views of life to be her law? Surely, no. And yet his presence, lost for so many months and all unwelcome as it had been, had proved something like the straight wall needed by those who would otherwise have to grope and stray over an unknown tract with uncertain feet and purblind eyes. She knew she had only to keep along the course of that wall, feeling it with her hands, and that it would keep her straight, and bring her somewhere.

‘I suppose one can’t expect a common person like Phil to have the feelings of a count, and a patriot, and a hero, and a disguised nobleman, and an artist, and a foreigner, and a Pole, or to understand them,’ thought she, in a duet with a sharper creak of the wheels. ‘They must belong to quite different worlds, as different as the things that books leave out are from the things that books put in. I wish I were really Olivia always. She was only troubled with great things. She never seemed to think of what she ought to say or ought to do; it all came to her.

What would Olivia have done if she had been me? I don't know, and—I don't care.'

But though she had her own immediate self to think of, it was not for nothing that Phœbe had gone through the experience of being, actually and in the flesh, that same Olivia for a part of that eventful afternoon. She had lost herself in her part, but she had also found another self therein. Never, in the solitude of her room, unvexed with personal excitement and fears, had she felt that sort of fire which had seemed to transmute the base metal of Phœbe Doyle into the gold of Olivia. People had told her she could act; but she knew now she could do something more—that she could be. And she had not lost the longing for the fuller and more complete life which she had failed to find in the flesh and which she now fancied was discoverable only in books or upon the stage, where the little things are struck out so that only the great things remain.

She did not see and hear, in the creaking of the wheels, a stage faced by applauding hundreds, with herself for the sham heroine of the hour. The applause of Sir Charles Bassett's guests had been nothing; the applause

of a hundred times the number of strangers would be nothing more. What she felt was the hitherto dumb longing to merge herself in some larger and loftier life than she had been able to find, even when the gates of wealth and station had been thrown open to her. Never had the life of shadows seemed so real to her as now, or the life into which she had been thrown so absolutely unreal. Was there, in truth and in fact, a father in front of her, a Cautleigh Hall behind? Was the Stanislas whom she had seen any more really existent than the Siberia of which she had only heard? But Olivia was real. And nothing else? Only Phil.

Her mood had passed far beyond every bound within which thoughts and feelings can bear one another company, when a loud snore at her side brought her into collision with one of the things wherewith Olivias have nothing to do, while, at the same time, the stoppage of the fly obliged her to face another. Mrs. Hassock reached the railway-station sound asleep.

‘My boxes?’ she said, mixing up the natural first thought of a passenger with the events of the morning; ‘yes, search them all. Not guilty. Oh! Where for? All for Lon-

don, please. We're at the station, miss. How nice you have slept, to be sure !'

Phœbe supposed herself broad awake, but it was not very easy to be sure. The night was black and cold, and the little wayside station, with its silence, its few patches of yellow gas, and its pair of eyes, one crimson and the other green, high up in the air, was a new experience to the untravelled lady from India. They were in plenty of time ; there was a good half-hour before the last train by which they could reach London was due. Mrs. Hassock bought two first-class tickets with Phil's money, and they sat down by the waiting-room fire to wait for the train in company with a sheet of texts, a bottle of water, and an unimportant old lady with a large basket and an umbrella. It was altogether unlike any experience that could possibly have happened to Olivia.

Probably the freezing point of depression is reached when, with a mind anxious or ill at ease, one has to wait at a wayside station, on a cold dark night, for an over-due train ; and for a woman the situation can only be second in misery to that of a man who has left his pipe at home. Mrs. Hassock, no

doubt a seasoned traveller, wrapped herself up in Phœbe's old waterproof, and took refuge in another audible doze. Phœbe would willingly have followed her duenna's example, but since she left the fly she had been growing painfully broad awake and morbidly eager for some sort of action. It seemed to be her fate to be always burning to do something when there was nothing to do, and to fail ignominiously whenever a moment for action came. There was nothing to be done now, and yet she felt as if she had lost the need to rest as well as the wish and the power. She did not want the train to hurry because she still wanted time to think over the manner of her return home; yet at the same time she was impatient for its movement, and to escape from the dismal waiting-room, from the snoring of Mrs. Hassock, and from the sight of the woman with the basket and the umbrella, which irritated her nerves in a perfectly unreasonable and unaccountable way. She read all the texts over the fireplace twenty times over, till she could say them off by heart, and instead of being the better was rather the worse for them. They chanced to be a selection of sentences which, being dragged away

from their context, had an angry and threatening effect, eminently unlikely to benefit the soul of an uninstructed heathen. She tried the bottle of water for a change, but that, judging from its taste, must have come from the part of the Holms which had the best recollection of its ocean mother.

A long luggage train once clattered by, but nothing else happened to break the general inaction. The half-hour had passed, and the train was long overdue. And was the whole of her life to be an endless reproduction of this wearisome waiting by the side of a railway along which other people travelled with some knowledge of whence they came and whither they were bound, and presumably with some purpose in the journey, and with some interest in the variety of the road? It looked like it. Or perhaps it looked more as if she were but a piece of goods, destined to be pitched here and there, taken up and put down again, to suit what must seem to it the caprice of others, and without a will of its own. She had often read of the 'will' in books, and the word was often in her mind, though of what it meant she had no more conception than people in general. Supposing she were

to take advantage of Mrs. Hassock's slumbers to take herself off altogether, and go somewhere or other, and never be heard of again? There was really desperate temptation in the mere thought of grasping hold of her own life with her own hands. There was nobody whom it would be a wrench to leave. With her own people she had broken long ago. Not that there had been anything much to break, beyond a few makeshift, semi-domestic habits and a platonic flirtation with a dead shrub and a clothes-line. There was her father; but what real place could she feel conscious of filling in the life of a cold, stern, self-contained man who had lived his life without her, and had only claimed her, late in life, under a sense of doubtlessly uncomfortable duty? No doubt he would be glad at heart to let his unnecessary daughter go, and to smoke and read, and live his days in peace without the daily task of having to make conversation over meals. He had been kind, but he could not possibly want her in his life—such a notion was even grossly absurd. There was Stanislas, her lover. Well, as to him, she had already, in the fly, made up her mind, entirely for his

sake, to let him go. There was Phil ; but then he was her enemy, her tyrant, her persecutor, although he had shown himself a merciful and generous foe. No, there was nobody that signified—not one. She sighed. It was indeed a sorry plight for a heroine.

What should she do, and where should she go ? But those were mere matters of detail which would no doubt settle themselves. The great thing was to make use of the moment, to give Mrs. Hassock the slip, and be gone. No more duennas, no more fathers, no more brothers, lovers, enemies ; no more friends. She had lived alone with her fancies all her life till she had found her father ; why not, by one bold stroke, lose her father, and again find those fancies of which the very poorest immeasurably transcended the finest bit of reality she had ever known ?

At first a half-startled whisper, the idea soon became startlingly loud, and reason, always at hand in readiness to support ideas which cannot stand alone, presently stepped in, and humbly suggested that yet another untried and therefore hopeful world was open to her—the stage. Had they not all told her she was a born actress—better, even, than the

best of long ago? If that were true, life might indeed be filled to overflowing, and she might be a hundred heroines in one.

More than half scared by a resolve of such desperate magnitude, she heard the station bell answer the whistle of the at last arriving train. If it had only been another five minutes late, or if she only had the power of becoming invisible at will! But so it always was with her; everything always happened in the wrong way at the wrong time. Mrs. Hassock started up, rubbed her eyes, and gathered herself together. They went upon the platform, and Phœbe watched the red eye of the advancing train as if it were that of an ogre approaching to devour her. Not having quite resolved, there was no time left to resolve now. The train drew up, the one passenger for the place—there was seldom more than one at a time—descended, and the one porter took the lady from the Hall in charge. There was no chance for an escape now; once more the decision of her own destiny had been wrested from her hands. She stepped into the carriage, and Mrs. Hassock followed her.

Phœbe felt for her purse to commit the usual breach of the company's bye laws, but,

naturally, in vain, seeing that her purse had that very morning gone the way of her watch and jewels. 'Give him something,' she whispered to her companion, remembering that she had given Mrs. Hassock Phil's money to buy the tickets. Mrs. Hassock, still confused with sleep, felt with one hand for the bag which she had been carrying with the other.

'Oh, Lord,' cried she, 'my reticule! With all the money, and I don't know what beside.'

'It's in the waiting-room,' said Phœbe; 'I know you had it there. But never mind, we sha'n't want money now. They're shutting the doors.'

'Oh, miss—ma'am—but I must mind. I won't be a minute,' and with a most uncharacteristic alacrity, too extreme to be caused by fear as to the safety of somebody else's money, the awakened sleeper forgot her dignity, and almost tumbled from the carriage, striking against a passenger who was finding a place in the train he had just caught.

But Mrs. Hassock heeded neither the victim of her weight nor the 'Now then! Take your places,' of the guard. The porter had ceased to take any interest in the passengers from the Hall, and had gone off on duty else-

where. So the platform was clear, and when Mrs. Hassock reached the waiting-room, that also was empty. Empty indeed, for it was not occupied by so much as her reticule.

She had hitherto always acted like a person of average common-sense, and more than average coolness; and, as such, she should surely have surrendered the not irreparable loss of a hand-bag to her duty towards Phoebe. But even the coolest heads, especially when still bemused with broken sleep, will lose themselves now and then, and the less they are used to such accidents the worse it will go with them. Could she by any chance have dropped it in the fly? No, she had put the money into the bag after paying for the tickets, of that she was sure. 'One would think I had been asleep,' thought she. But anyhow, the reticule was gone; and before she could follow it with her mind, a whistle and three loud snorts told her that the train had gone too.

The porter came into the waiting-room to turn off the gas, the last passenger train having gone.

'Have you seen a lady's black reticule?' asked Mrs. Hassock. 'I know I had it this minute ago.'

‘You’re the lady that saw off the lady by the up train?’

‘Yes, and I can swear to that reticule.’

‘If that’s a black bag, she’s all right. I put her in the carriage along with the shawls.’

He turned off one of the two gas jets while he spoke, and then began to rake out the fire.

‘Bless me, man, I don’t mean the young lady; I mean my reticule.’

‘And bless me, ma’am, I mean that too. If ’twasn’t meant to go, it’s unlucky, for it’s half-way to the next station by now. By your leave, ma’am, I’m going to turn off the other gas.’

And so he did without further warning; so that how Mrs. Hassock took the news that, though her train was lost, her reticule was safe in Phœbe’s hands, remained unknown to him. Passengers from the Hall were mostly worthy of all attention; but certainly not these.

Such had been Mrs. Hassock’s haste that not more than a minute had really passed between her flight from the train and its parting whistle. Phœbe had scarcely had time to settle herself and look round, no time

at all to realise that chance had plotted for her, and brought to pass the very escape she had been bold enough to devise but too unready to carry out, when the passenger who had entered her carriage at the last moment had settled himself in the most distant corner, and also looked round.

‘Ah, then you are going home!’ said Phil, for her fellow-traveller was he. Could she have told how he was fresh from the ruin of his career, and was at that very moment openly risking a gaol for her sake, she would have wondered over everything about him, even his presence there. But, ever since yesterday morning, it had long ceased to be a matter of wonder with her to find, whenever there was a chance of her running out of the course, this enemy at her elbow, compelling her to go his way and not hers. What would be the use of spreading her wings and flying even to the moon, when she knew perfectly well that she would find Philip Nelson waiting for her on the other side? Such persistent tyranny was enough to make even a butterfly turn, especially as Philip’s voice had as little kindness in it as if it had been addressed to some creature only fit for scorn.

‘And suppose I am not going home?’ she flashed out sharply.

‘Suppose you have forgotten your promise, do you mean?’

‘I never promised to be treated like a child.’

‘No. Children never do. There is no need. I suppose you’ll be glad to hear that—that Count Adrianski is safe; and that, therefore, so are you?’

She could not help one sigh of intense relief. If Stanislas was safe and free, she was no longer under the law which compelled her to be openly and outwardly faithful to a man in danger. But what power did Phil possess to make him more than a match for the Czar? There was something fascinating, if terrible, about such power; it compelled her to battle with it, and to prove him absolutely insuperable by force or wit before giving in.

‘I am not a child!’ exclaimed she. ‘I shall not go home!’

‘Then, where are you going now?’

‘I don’t—I mean—where I please.’

‘You are so utterly in that man’s power?’

‘I will be in nobody’s power—that is—not in yours!’

She knew well enough that she must needs give way ; but still she battled on.

‘Perhaps not, Phœbe,’ he said bitterly, ‘for long. But as long as I can keep free—— Well, we won’t talk any longer now. I have to think, before I say another word. But, meanwhile, you are going home.’

‘I told you where I am going—perhaps home, perhaps not ; but, anyhow, where I please.’

‘Then there’s nothing else to be said at all. You are going home.’

CHAPTER XXII

THE END OF MISS DOYLE

THE journey was continued and ended in almost absolute silence. Phœbe's soarings after escape into the air of a higher, wider, fuller, and more harmonious world turned to feebly hopeless flutterings; Phil had grasped her by the wings, as a boy catches a sparrow. She had nothing to say to him; and as for him, it was impossible to preach to a woman one has loved on the text of her having become a thief and a companion of thieves, if not more than the mere companion of one of them. He was dumbly indignant with the universe, and scornful of himself for being unable to concentrate his universal indignation sufficiently upon Phœbe. She appeared hopelessly and shamelessly lost beyond reclaim, and he had to think afresh at every fresh step over what could possibly be done with her. As for her, she was in twenty

states of mind at once, all of them as seemingly inconsistent with one another as if she had ten different hearts and ten different brains. She was afraid to go back to her father in this unaccountable and inexplicable fashion, and yet was longing to be at home again, where nothing but dulness and solitude could henceforth trouble her. She still wanted to escape from everybody, and longed to be taken in hand so strongly as to be made to feel that escape was impossible. She was as ready as ever to stand up for Stanislas if he were attacked, and to be true to him in danger, yet she shuddered at the very thought of ever having to see his face again. Her whole nature was rebelling against Phil's usurped mastery over all the details of her life, and yet, though it enraged her, it was the nearest approach to anything like comfort she knew. She was even afraid that if Stanislas, her lover, bade her go to the right, and Phil to the left, she would turn to the left, despising herself for her choice all the while. She wanted to go to her father as a refuge from Phil, and yet knew that, if ever Phil was to give up his course of tyranny, her life would feel empty for ever as it had

never felt before. Anything seemed better than nothing—war better than the peace of neglected loneliness and unbroken inaction.

At last the long journey came to an end. She was a bad and inexperienced traveller, and Mrs. Hassock having clearly managed to get left behind, had to depend upon Phil for getting through the troubles of an unfamiliar terminus at night-time. He put her into a cab, and took his seat by her side. She wished he had let her go home alone, but could not rebel against an attention that was natural in itself, though its motive might be that of a suspicious gaoler. At any rate, she did not rebel.

‘I despise her,’ and ‘I hate him,’ would have been the spoken answers of Philip Nelson and Phœbe Doyle had they been questioned concerning their feelings towards one another. And yet he had been deliberately ruining himself for her sake, and was still risking worse than simple ruin, while she could not bring herself to be wholly afraid of anything, not even of her father, while the contempt of the man she hated was round her and present with her to guard her from love, and freedom, and all other good

things. The night was dark, even for the close of a London winter, and Phœbe, unused to its maze, and confused by the effects of a first return to its lights, its blackness, its odour, and its roar, after a first absence, noticed nothing out of the way in the route that the cabman was taking for Harland Terrace. Indeed, she was not heeding the way, but only thinking of the end. And if she had both known and heeded it, it was sure to be all right, since Phil was with her. Even when the cab stopped at last, she did not perceive at once that Harland Terrace must, during her absence in the country, have undergone an extraordinary change. Before giving her his hand to help her from the cab, he knocked at the door, and, as soon as it opened, led her in, without giving her a chance of looking round.

But, once within the narrow passage, she saw that Phil had not been bringing her home. It was apparently the close, sour-smelling entrance of some third-rate lodging-house, altogether in keeping with the pert and slatternly servant-girl who opened the door, and who now stood staring, open-mouthed, at the fine young lady whom Phil

had brought back with him. There was a look about the passage that reminded Phœbe of her old home, in its untidy arrangements as well as in its atmosphere ; she could almost fancy that the great coat hanging from the hat-peg over the staggering umbrella-stand belonged to her foster-father the admiral. Things looked less poverty-stricken than in the old home, it is true, but even more slovenly than those with which her own hands had formerly been condemned to do daily battle.

Could Phil, even Phil, have been playing her a trick—did he, following out his rôle of arch villain, have her carried off to some secret hiding-hole, so that Stanislas might be unable to discover her ? Was it all a part of a deep-laid plot—had he really saved Stanislas after all ? She had read of such things, and of worse things ; and though beginning to suspect there may be a good deal of doubtful truth written about what heroines feel, she could not doubt the truth of what she saw. Before the slow eyes of a man could have begun to ask questions, hers had taken in every detail—the cracked ceiling, the ragged floor-cloth, the dusty glass globe within which

a gas jet was leaping from blue into yellow and back again, the Tower of Pisa-like condition of the umbrella-stand, and the long black smut that reached from one corner of the maid-of-all-work's open mouth to the opposite eyebrow. Then she heard the swish of the cabman's whip outside, and the start of the wheels. She was in Phil's power, and alone.

'Where have you brought me?' she asked, in a tone that made the servant-girl stare yet more widely. 'What does this mean?' Strangely enough, she did not at that moment feel the least afraid of Phil. The revelation of his dishonesty broke the power of his spell. 'You shall let me go, or I will——'

Alas! what?

'I don't know what you mean,' said Phil coldly, and not so very much surprised at her outbreak. Folly seemed so natural in a fool. 'I said I should bring you home, and I have brought you home. Go and tell your master,' he said to the servant, 'that I am come home. Say nothing about the young lady, do you hear? Is he in the parlour?'

'Lord, no sir!' said the girl. 'He's

down in the scullery a-cleaning of the knives. I'll tell him. Hi!' she called out from the far end of the passage to the basement; 'here's the young gentleman that came here once before. And you'd better put on your coat and scrub yourself up a bit at the sink, because there's company.'

It was quite true that the ex-Grand President was without his coat, and engaged in knife-cleaning. The fact is that wealth had its usual effect upon a man to whom it had come late in life; it had driven him to the most ingenious contrivances for finding something to do. As a man of position and capital, he had quarrelled with his political party, and was placed above the old drudgery of copying law papers, so that, having read the money article and taken a stroll for health's sake, he was fain to seek the kitchen and the scullery for the sake of company. Maria, it is true, was not quite so intelligent a listener as Phœbe had been, but she was exceedingly good-natured, and quite free from any sort of nonsense about doing her own work in her own way.

'Phil again!' he groaned, as, in obedience to his housemaid's orders, he turned the tap

over his fingers and damped down his hair. 'What's he come for now? He's like a regular infernal machine, that boy! If he only wanted money like the others I should know what to do; but he doesn't take a bit after my side of the family, not at all. Well, I must see him, I suppose; but I'll give Maria a hint to say "Not at home for a week" if he comes exploding here again. Ah, Phil, my boy! delighted to see you, I'm sure!' he said, as, still engaged in pulling on his coat, he entered the parlour. 'But—— Holloa!'

At the sight of Phil's companion he came to a full stop, so complete that it got in the way of his dressing; his left arm got entangled in its sleeve, and he had to remain at the doorway in a state of general dislocation.

'Oh, Lord!' he cried, vaguely aware that he had, as a matter of course, lied about Phœbe to his terrible son, but unable to remember exactly what the lie had been. 'It's Phœbe come home!'

So this was what Phil had meant by bringing her home. Of course he must only have been acting in error, after all; but how was it credible that the only member of the house of Nelson who cared a straw about her

should be the only one who did not know what she herself had meant by 'home'? There were no homelike associations, except of the most unpleasant sort, to galvanise into life any dead and unnatural affection for the admiral, who had parted with her so readily for money down. And she would have been something less or more than woman had not her experiences of other homes gone far to disgust her with that of the first part of her own history, peaceful as it had been. She felt no impulse, so she obeyed none. And, for that matter, an embrace, considering the relation of the admiral to his coat, was physically impossible.

'Yes,' said Phil, while Phœbe waited for things to explain themselves. 'She is come home to stay.'

'And what in the name of fortune has happened then? Is he dead—bolted—smashed up—broken down?'

'Never mind what has happened, father,' said Phil. 'I'll talk to you another time.'

'That's all very fine——'

'You needn't be afraid,' said Phœbe quietly. 'Phil is quite wrong. I am not going to stay.'

I am going home. If the girl will get me a cab, I will go now.'

'Certainly,' said the admiral, struggling into his coat at last; 'certainly, my dear, if you wish it. I'm hanged if I know what you're come for, if it's not even to tea; but as you must go, I suppose now's as good a time as to-morrow or yesterday. Maria,' he called out, with his hand for a speaking-trumpet, 'run out and get a cab, a growler, for the lady.'

'Can't,' cried a shrill voice from below. 'I'm changing myself, and sha'n't be done this half-hour. You'd better go yourself, you're always wanting something to do.'

'All right—all right,' shouted the admiral back again; 'never you mind, I'll go.' And, glad of a reprieve to think things over, he was hurrying out when Phil took him by the arm.

'Father! You will not turn my sister out of doors?'

'I'm beginning to think,' said Phœbe, 'that you could not have quite understood what you were doing when you brought me here. I am going to my real father—to my real home. Do you understand now? You

have no right to keep me here ; I have no right to stay.'

Phil did not answer her.

'What does she mean ?' asked he.

The admiral sought support from the door-post, in a more uncomfortable frame of mind than he had ever thought to be since he had done with duns. He almost groaned. He remembered now that it was he who had accounted to Phil for Phœbe's disappearance by accusing her of a disgraceful elopement with Stanislas Adrianski, and he, at any rate, understood his son well enough to know what Phil thought of a lie. The son was the father's conscience ; to be deceived, indeed, but always to be feared, and there was this about Phil Nelson, that his mere presence seemed to have the effect of making people see things as they really are. There was not another living being to whom the admiral would not have lied, without feeling the prick of a pin, twenty times a day ; and now an innocent bit of expediency, for the sake of peace and quiet, looked like what it really was, and his feeble accusation of a girl whom he thought he had done with, uncomfortably like a cowardly slander. How was he either

to confess or to conceal? Why had he been such an ass as not to tell Phil the whole story when the latter first came home? He forgot that a situation which now, in comparison with the present, looked easy when looked back upon, had seemed, in its own day, insuperable except by that innocent bit of expediency.

‘She means——’ began he. ‘Bother me, Phil, if I know what she means! Or if I know what you mean. Or if I know what anybody means,’ he went on, his voice rising higher and higher, as if he were working himself up into a fit of honest anger. ‘Look here! You say Phœbe’s come to stay. Are you come to stay, too?’

‘No,’ said Phil, sadly enough. ‘I don’t know where I’m going or what I’m going to do. But I’m not coming back home.’

‘Well, you know your own affairs best, my boy,’ said the admiral more complacently; ‘you always did, and you always will. I shouldn’t wonder if you went to Australia some day. That’s where I’d go if I was a young man. Upon my soul, Phil, if you were going to Australia, I’d put a twenty-pound note to your outfit, there! Think about Australia, my boy, and let me know. There, there, there. We’ll be all right and

comfortable, never fear. You'd better be off now, and I'll sit up and talk things over with Phœbe. The idea of my shutting my door on a girl that's ate of my bread and drunk of my cup for goodness knows how many years. I'll talk it all out with Phœbe, and then we'll never mention the subject again—never by so much as a word. We'll none of us ask any questions, and then we shall get no answers, you know. There, good-night, and God bless you. And think of Australia, you know. You're not so very far off you know, when you're once there.'

'Then that's all right, so far,' said Phil. 'And now I have done what I can. I'll see Dick, and the boys, and then—and I must have another talk with you, father, before I'm off for good, whether it's to Australia or wherever it may be. I did think of Botany Bay.' He had already told his first lie, and he had now made his first joke; in justice to him, it was a grim one.

Things were going better than the admiral had feared. If Phil was really going to take his hint about taking his intensely uncomfortable moral perversities to the Antipodes, and meanwhile would consent to let Phœbe's escapade be forgiven and forgotten, he might wink, after a

little while, at Phœbe's return to her real home, and trust to remain undisturbed for an indefinite time. It was really hard to be thus worried by his children, and by other people's children, during the afternoon—he did not call it evening—of his days.

Phœbe had been listening for the last few minutes without much heeding what she heard. What Phil might have to say to his father, or his father to Phil, could not really concern her, and she was, for once, clearly resolved to go home now, unless downright force were used to prevent her. Surely if Phil had acted altogether in error when he brought her there, he should have instantly set matters straight instead of still treating her as if she were a prisoner and he her gaoler. But something in the tone of his last words went deeper than her ears. And she felt whether prisoner or no, that liberty may sometimes be less worth having than a struggle for liberty. Phil's departure would end the struggle, and give her freedom. But what then? A prison is a safe place, after all, and to hate somebody is better than to love nobody. She was out of love even with her own fancies, though she stuck to them still.

‘I am going home,’ she said. ‘I am going now. Nobody need get me a cab. I’ll walk till I find one, and my luggage can stay till it’s sent for. Good-night, father—good-night, I mean. No, don’t stop me now, Phil. It seems odd there should be anything you don’t understand, but he will tell you, when I’m gone. You’ve not been good to me, though you’ve saved—and I couldn’t be good to you. I suppose—I suppose we shall never see one another again. Good-bye.’

It was the simplest and most womanly speech Phil had ever heard her make—indeed, that she had ever made.

‘There is something in all this,’ he said with angry impatience, ‘that I don’t understand. What do you mean by your father—your home?’

‘Oh, Lord!’ groaned the admiral. ‘The apple-cart’s toppling now. I say, Phil, you come with me into the scullery, or somewhere where we can talk in private; there’s things I can’t exactly mention before her.’

‘I think it will be best indeed,’ said Phil, sternly even for him. Strangely enough, he alone, of all the admiral’s acquaintance, was the only one who believed, if not in his father’s

strength, yet in his father's truth and honour. And that belief was beginning to be shaken now, following the loss of his faith in Phœbe, as the leaves will fall with the broken bough.

‘There's no need for that,’ said Phœbe quite calmly, though she felt anything but calm. Why, when Phil had her in his power, should he talk of going away and never seeing anybody again? ‘I'll tell you, as you don't seem to know anything about me. If you hadn't known, or had cared to know, I would have told you at Cautleigh Hall. It's all simple enough. I live at Harland Terrace. Phil, did you never ask what had become of me? Was my finding my own father nothing to you? Oh, I can hardly believe!’

‘No,’ said Phil stubbornly. ‘I was told by strangers, that you are a Miss Doyle from India. I knew that you had never been in India, and that your name is not Doyle.’

‘My father has been there; my name is Phœbe Doyle. Have you anything more to say?’

‘What!’ cried the admiral; ‘do you mean to stand there, and to tell me—me, that the old gentleman who came here and wouldn't tell his name, was Doyle—Jack

Doyle? Ah, that accounts for no remittance this Christmas; but what am I saying? Lord, what an ass I've been! Doyle—Jack Doyle! Why, bless the girl, he's no more your father than I am; and what he wanted to saddle himself with you for, hang me if I know!'

The admiral's outburst of astonished speech was not so imprudent as it seemed; though, when it was over, its over haste frightened him.

'Phil, I made a little mistake, don't you see; told you the wrong man, don't you understand? But that old gentleman Doyle—Jack Doyle! This is a queer world. And—oh, Lord!' he exclaimed, overcome by the recollection of the lies he had told while selling Phœbe to the only man in the world who knew them to be lies, 'What an ass I am to be sure!'

'You told me,' said Phil, 'that Phœbe had gone——'

'I thought so—I thought so, Phil; don't name names before her, she mightn't like it, you know; I'm glad I'm wrong. You see, 'twas only with one of her fathers, after all; only one of 'em, you see. We're not going to

ask any questions, you know—not before her. I'll explain it all to you, between ourselves, you know, my dear Phil, in the twinkling of an eye.'

Phil turned away. The explanation was nothing, after all. Had she been proved twenty times over to be the daughter of a man named Doyle, that made it none the less certain that Stanislas Adrianski was her lover, that Stanislas Adrianski had been with her at Cautleigh, that a certain jewel had been stolen from Mrs. Urquhart, and that Stanislas had received it from Phœbe's hands. Why should a man who was not her father adopt her without even letting his name appear? Was this mysterious Doyle a tool of Stanislas, or was he the concealed captain of the gang? And then his own father's sudden and mysterious increase of wealth, and incomprehensible manner. Phil bowed his face in his hands to hide from sight the legion of demons of mystery that rose before him. At last he had come face to face with more than he could bear. He had become the scapegoat of a gang of thieves.

'Come, my boy,' said his father, taking courage to pat him on the shoulder, 'cheer

up, everything's all right now. But no questions, you know.'

'No,' said Phil. 'None. I have done what I can. I—give in.'

'Phil's a queer chap,' said the admiral, with a nervous laugh, as soon as the street-door closed behind his son. 'He's a very queer chap, I may say. I'm glad to see you again, Phœbe; I am, upon my word. Why, you're quite a lady, and I do believe you've grown! I wonder who Maria thinks you are. Where in the world did you come across Phil? I'm vexed it's happened—very vexed indeed. Where on earth did you come across him—eh?'

'Cautleigh Hall. You say that—that——' she faltered in a low voice; but all at once she spoke with a firmness altogether foreign to her. 'You say Mr. Doyle is not my father. Is it true?'

'Of course it's true. Fancy that fellow being Jack Doyle! and a man like that wanting to adopt—— But where did you say? Cautleigh Hall? In Lincolnshire, do you mean? And you've been staying down there? It's something more than a queer world. It's a queerer.'

‘Tell me, please, how you know Mr. Doyle is not my father.’

It was as if some altogether new Phœbe was speaking now ; perhaps the admiral was not altogether wrong in accusing her of having grown. But the growth was not five minutes old.

‘Eh? There’s something about you, Phœbe, that I shouldn’t know if I met you in the streets of China. But I’ll tell you, because I want to know why he thought you worth four thousand pounds. I’ve a right to know. You know how you came to me and the old lady. Jack Doyle was there when you came. And his story about his wife was a—bang. And it’s queer, very queer, you should have been staying at the Bassetts’, because one of the Bassetts was a pal of Doyle’s, and it isn’t likely Jack Doyle would get taken up by Charley’s friends. Quite the other way. It’s a coincidence, that is——’

‘I don’t know why I should be bought and sold like a slave,’ said Phœbe, but without a sign of anger. ‘I don’t see why anybody should want me. Even—even Phil didn’t care to know—— Sir Charles Bassett and

my father—I mean Mr. Doyle—were old friends.'

'Bless my—what! Do you mean to tell me that Charles Bassett—young Charley Bassett, who kept in Gray's Inn—has become Sir Charles Bassett of Cautleigh Hall? On your oath—I mean, are you sure?'

'He knew Mr. Doyle, and I have heard him talk of living in Gray's Inn. Well, I know everything now; and I'll go home. I suppose I may have a cab, now that Phil's gone?'

'A cab? Certainly, my dear. A what? Oh, a cab—a cab; fifty if you please. I'd never thought of a chance like that—and such a lot of good lives, too.'

'Why do you suppose Mr. Doyle wanted me?'

'I don't suppose anything, my dear—I know.'

'You know——'

'That I'm an ass, my dear. But it's better to be an ass than a knave. But—all the same—it's never too late to mend.'

'No father—no brother—no lover—no friend—no enemy any more,' sighed Phoebe

silently. 'Nothing but myself for all the rest of my days. Will you let me thank you for taking care of me while I was a child? I'm not one now.'

'What will the Robespierres say? And I knowing all their secrets—it's positively awful. It convinces me of the existence of Providence, if I hadn't been sure of it all along.'

'Even he doesn't remember I'm in the room,' sighed Phœbe again. 'May I have a cab before any of the boys come home?'

'Holloa, Maria! Tumble up! A whole cabstand for Miss Doyle!'

'Not for Miss Doyle,' said Phœbe; 'only for me.'

PART IV

PHŒBE'S FORTUNE

CHAPTER I

ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER

DOYLE'S attempted return to the unfettered joys of bachelorhood had been an unquestionable failure. Phœbe's presence had proved bad enough, but her absence, considered as an experiment, had turned out worse still. So long as she had been with him, every day had brought with it a sort of interest, however uncomfortable; while she had been away, peace and comfort had returned, but had brought a sense of solitude to the man who had been content to live alone, uncomplainingly, for the whole period between youth and middle age.

Hence it followed that Phœbe, troublesome as she was, was very often in his thoughts—

which, by the way, is part of the privilege of troublesome people. It is only your pleasant congenial people who pass out of mind when they pass out of sight, while the burdensome, like yesterday's disagreeable adventures, stand out upon the background of life, refuse to be forgotten, and make gratitude for our release from them feel singularly like gratitude towards the authors of those past troubles. In short, Doyle missed his adopted daughter very much indeed—her incapacity for companionship, her sullenness, everything about her, even to her untrustworthiness, and especially her knack of always doing whatever was least to be looked for.

His purchase of a daughter had certainly been a failure, so far as he was concerned. Present, he wanted her away; absent, he wanted her back again—so that she was a discomfort under every conceivable relation. And the worst of her was that, with all her faults and disappointing qualities, she had rendered him incapable of going back to his oyster-shell in the old appropriate habit of mind. It used to be a sort of comfort to escape from the fetters of Phœbe's presence at the breakfast-table to the freedom of a cigar

in the library. But now that it had ceased to be an escape from anything, the piquancy of the cigar had gone. He might, till her return, do what he liked, smoke where he liked, feed when he liked, and he had ceased to care any longer for how, where, or when. He had taken another life into his own, and, however much he might regret his bargain, did not find it easy to get it out again.

The dutiful impulse, or impulsive sense of duty, under which he, without forethought for himself, had tried to make up for the lapses of his fellow fathers, had been forgotten long ago ; only the nature of his own relations with Phœbe remained. And the time had come, under the influence of her absence, when he had to ask himself what that relation really meant, and what it came to ; and the question was a great deal easier than any possible answer. He was not her father, after all, and he could not but confess that his attempt to play the part of one had completely broken down.

These things were especially borne in upon him when he received one of Phœbe's not too frequent letters, giving him very little news

of herself, but a great deal of perfectly uninteresting matter concerning the daily doings of Cautleigh Hall. Long as her visit had been, he had never suggested her return home, for the simple but all-sufficient reason that her return was what he most wished for.

““Here lies an ass,”” thought he, ‘will be the first sentence on my tombstone. Let me see what I ought to have done all my life; perhaps it mightn’t be too late to pick up a few of the pieces even now. There was Stella—that’s all over and gone; there’s nothing, thank Heaven, left to pick up there. There was my time in London—all I was ass enough to think she’d left me; that’s all over, too—and not much harm, I suppose people would say, seeing that I’ve come out safe and sober at the other end. No, after all, it wasn’t in those days that I was the real ass, I’m afraid. But what, in the name of long ears, have I got to show for twenty years of money-grubbing, except, perhaps, another twenty years, or another thirty, may be; except an empty house and an empty day, and a prospect of ten thousand more empty days beyond? There isn’t left me so much as the work of

making that child into a woman—into what a woman ought to be. I believe, if a girl was born and brought up in a desert island, some unheard-of and impossible young man would manage to get wrecked there before she was out of her teens—and the devil with him. No, that notion's gone, and she may turn into another Stella for anything I can do. As if I couldn't see in this very letter that there are a thousand things she's hiding—just like them all. . . . And if I could make her all I dreamed of making her, which I can't, and if I had bought what I bargained for, which I haven't, I could hardly be such an ass, even at my worst of times, to expect her to wait till I died before she married some other ass. Why, I don't feel like dying for forty years. I can't go on like this, and when she comes back, I can't go on like that. As a daughter, she's a failure. But I've taken her up, and I can't drop her down. She must end in marrying somebody, I suppose—she's nothing better than a woman, after all, worse luck. Well, then, she must marry me. There's no help for it. It's the only thing left to be done.'

He sighed, and thought it the sigh of a

man who has been obliged, in spite of himself, to make up his mind to some very last resource of all. It might have revealed to him much of the secret history of why he had thought it his simple duty to save Phœbe from all the perils of her womanhood; of why her companionship had been such a disturbing element in his life; of why he wanted her back again, faults and all. It is not the first time that duty and necessity have been made answerable for what a man wants, but is afraid or ashamed of wanting. There was certainly no reason on earth why Doyle should feel it any sort of duty to promote himself from the rank of father to that of husband, and every reason why he should not wish to draw an over-strained bond tighter still. A microscope will not discover an atom of logic in the argument that led him from 'Here lies an ass' to 'Well, then, she must marry me.' But his argument was sound, and only too sound. He was a man whose soul had been asleep for, not twenty, but fifty years, and such a waking is a wonderful thing.

Had she not gone away he might never have found it out—not even now; and had

she come back in a day, or in seven days, he might not have found out that what he had taken for temporary release from a burden was simply the restlessness of—I cannot even yet say of a lover. He himself would even now have repelled the word. The farce of love had been played out when the curtain had fallen on Stella, and he was not, at his time of life, going to make a fool of himself again. What he chose to call himself was a man with a certain self-imposed duty towards a girl which he could fulfil in no other way, and he would have been right enough had he taken common pains to find out any other way. What he felt was the simple need of a heart grown tired of its own company and eager to feast upon barely-tasted food. The broken life that had begun in Helmforth and had ended in the slums of London; the one point of honour that had transformed him into a hard, rich, lonely man; the influence of Phœbe, while unknown, unseen, and more than half forgotten, over that second life; the disappointed, misunderstood, awkward reaching out after some ghost of a home for the rest of his days—all these things would resolve themselves into purpose and meaning if

the child who had chanced to change him should bring about a far better and greater change than from drunken blackguard into respectable householder.

No wonder that he looked back now with horror, not to such dead dreams as what others would call his follies, but to the period of what others would call his wisdom—to that violent hunt for gold which was all that so-called sanity had to give him. He had done very well in India without friends, for he had wanted none, and had worked on, first for the sake of an idle promise to a baby, then for the work's sake, till he had grown case-hardened to the bad name that a money-making man without a friend or an open past was tolerably safe to obtain. Those who, like Lawrence, told stories of the means by which the reputed usurer was able to indulge secretly in unspeakable luxury would have been amazed indeed had they been admitted to see the real life of John Doyle in India, with its small profits, its large savings, and its unceasing strain. They would have changed envious scandal into contemptuous pity, but they would have shuddered at the idea of any human being leading such a life almost

as much as he shuddered now at its recollection. And yet even a return to this would be better than, having once dreamed of what home might mean, to go on and on, through a mere desert, nowhither. All sorts of long-forgotten feelings came back to him, and seemed new-born. It needed nothing more than the flutter of a moth through his life to make him sadly aware that neither the Archdeacon of Bohemia, nor the gold grub, no, nor even Stella's lover, had been the true John Doyle, but the quiet lad at Oxford, with no ambitions that were not worthy or thoughts that were not pure.

'It was she who made me rich,' thought he. 'I think she can make me myself again, if she will.' And he went so far back in life as he thought it, as to forget that he was fifty years old.

But would she? Now that he was face to face with the idea, and knew that he wanted her in his life to the end, faults and all; now that he had found out how home, without her vagaries and tempers, was not home at all—the question rose up rather blankly. It was true that she had, all unconsciously, and when scarcely out of her cradle,

performed the seeming miracle of converting Jack Doyle the blackguard into John Doyle the gentleman. Would she see the necessity of completing her work by converting the respectable into the happy man? As simply and as seriously as if it were not weakly absurd, the more than middle-aged man went straight to the mirror over the mantel-piece and looked himself in the face as well as the question. On the score of mere appearance, there was no reason why he should be afraid. In some respects he looked his age, and in some less, but in no respect a year older. Honestly, he could not tell himself that he had not the advantage of—say Stanislas Adrianski. Not that any man need be afraid of that mountebank; but still the name had to come into his mind, for want of a better. Neither broken heart, nor broken life, nor India, nor gold, had done him much outward harm; perhaps he had found them hardening on the whole. There came into his head the half-remembered dictum of some Frenchman, laughed at in the days when he read books, to the effect that in a man the true age for success in love lies between fifty and fifty-five. He did not think much of the

opinion even now, but the jest was at any rate as welcome as the grossest and most transparent flattery never fails to be. 'After all, October is a good way off from January,' thought he, 'and a good deal nearer to May, at least to last May.' How would she take the news that her father was not her father, after all? But there was no hurry for that. The story would keep very well for a few months at any rate, before October grew into November and May into June.

'She must come back, and things must not be quite as they were before,' he thought again, turning away from the mirror and lighting another cigar to break through the unpleasant recollection that he would have to tell Phœbe a very long story indeed, in place of the family history which he had invented for her benefit some months ago. 'I'm afraid Mrs. Hassock was right after all, and that a girl can't help getting into mischief when she's left too much alone. This is a dull house—miserably empty and dull. I'll wait till she comes back, and we'll travel for a while. Why not? I wonder I never thought of it before. And there's no occasion to go into Poland or anywhere that we don't please.

Yes, I am afraid Mrs. Hassock was right after all. So right that she'd better go. I can let the house, I suppose. I'll see an agent about it to-day. It'll be something to do before dinner-time.' The form of thought was not very lover-like, nor, for that matter, was it inspired by passion. What did inspire it was a desire of the heart deeper and stronger than any passion, and which may possibly, in very truth, give a certain superiority to fifty years of age over five-and-twenty. It was even a luxury, without reference to Phœbe in particular, to stretch the limbs of his heart, and to let himself feel that he could feel something about somebody, himself included; and all the time there was a quiet calm about the luxury which made it infinitely superior to the wildest fit of passion he had ever felt for Stella long ago. And why should Phœbe refuse to share the whole life of one whom she could make, nay, had made, feel young again?

The raven heard the swallows chattering in the eaves above him, and said: '*We* have come back again!'

It is almost as rash to play at being relations as to play at friends.

He was almost as good a correspondent as Phœbe was a bad one, but he did not answer that last letter, though meaning to do so from day to day. Perhaps, out of business, nobody ever did write a letter who was compelled to think one set of thoughts while making believe with his pen to think another. When I say 'his pen,' I mean 'his,' for I am told that women, and some men who are like women, can do it very well. At any rate, Doyle was far too clumsy-minded to do two things at once, even badly. So, having stumbled into this new garden, wherein there reigned a second summer more spring-like than spring, he took to building all sorts of fanciful summer-houses there. He wrote a dozen letters to Phœbe in his mind and tore them up without the help of fingers. And it is sadly to be feared that Phœbe did not miss one of them.

There was nothing sudden in this outgrowth of sentiment towards the girl, who had, after all, from the first, made and secretly ruled his career. It was her baby hand that had led him out of the mire, until he had reached a dry place whence he might dare to look upward. Of course he had no

more real knowledge of her than she of him, and—strange thing in a lover of any age—gave her credit, if not for too many faults, yet for faults which had not, yet at least, become hers. But he had seen from the first that, in spite of silence which closely resembled stupidity, she had some peculiar kind of charm, which deepened on further knowledge—if nothing better, the charm of the unknown. He remembered a hundred inconsistent things in her ; notably how she had found both tongue and spirit in defence of her secret lover—less conspicuously, how she had, by some peculiar word or look, shown him that she had some sort of inward life of her own.

‘She’s afraid of me, I’m afraid,’ he thought one afternoon while returning from a call upon a neighbouring house-agent ; for though he had come to look upon the Adrianski episode as a past escapade, for which Cautleigh Hall would prove a certain remedy, he could not quite forget the secrecy, amounting to deceit, with which she had carried on her own affairs until he had brought her to bay. ‘She’s afraid of me, as a bear, and she was afraid of that fellow, as a

tiger, and she couldn't know that he was all growl and no spring. I mustn't let her think I'm all growl too. Holloa! A cab at my door? What the deuce does that mean?'

Indeed, since Sir Charles Bassett's call, no visitor, either on foot or otherwise, had been in Harland Terrace, except to the neighbours. It could not be Sir Charles this time, and there was nobody else possible at any time, unless it were a cabman who had mistaken the number. On that chance, Doyle slackened his steps, to give anybody who had mistaken a bear's den for a human habitation time to sheer off quietly. But as soon as the door-bell had been answered, a person descended who would have been Mrs. Hassock, had not Mrs. Hassock been in Lincolnshire.

Yet there were not two Mrs. Hassocks—could anything be wrong? Doyle, who had not felt nervous about anybody, not even about himself, since he had left Helmforth, felt nervous now. He strode forward quickly, and reached the door just as Mrs. Hassock, or her wraith, was entering the hall.

'What is wrong?' asked he.

'Lord, sir! Why we heard you were at death's door. But you must have been taken

better in a wonderful way ! I hope you've been given to understand how I happened to lose the train ? and I hope Miss Doyle didn't overlook my bag—of course my box came with her luggage—I'm very sorry ; such an accident never happened in my life before.'

Not a word could he understand.

'I at death's door ? What do you mean ? Tell me at once what has happened—no ; pay the cabman first and come in. Now then. Why have you come back ?'

He and she could only stare at one another ; for Mrs. Hassock looked at him in such a bewildered way that he began to suspect that, in engaging her, he ought to have asked some question concerning her sanity. But at any rate his fear was over. She would have told him at once if anything had happened to Phœbe.

'Do I understand you to say, sir,' said Mrs. Hassock, all at once recovering some portion of her dignity, 'that Miss Doyle has not informed you of my misfortune, which was as innocent as the babe unborn ?'

'I have not heard from your mistress for days. What do you mean by your misfortune ? Can't you explain ?'

‘Not of how I had the misfortune to lose the train?’

‘My good woman, for Heaven’s sake begin at the beginning at once, and tell me what you mean. Do get rid of that inveterate habit of beginning everything at the end.’

‘It was all my reticule——’

‘Oh, confound your reticule! If that’s the beginning—being anywhere you please.’

‘If that’s how you please to take it, sir,’ said Mrs. Hassock, fairly recovering all the rest of her dignity and more, ‘I will humbly refer you to Miss Doyle, as she has not thought fit to explain.’

‘I shall certainly write to my daughter and ask her what this means. But I don’t choose to wait till the day after to-morrow for your version of whatever this misfortune of yours may be.’

‘Do I understand you to say, sir, that you will write to Miss Doyle? Am I to understand that she is from home?’

‘From home?’ Doyle could only ask, almost hoping that Mrs. Hassock was really out of her mind. ‘Of course she is from home. How can she be here when you have left her at Cautleigh Hall?’

‘I leave her at Cautleigh Hall! I came with her all the way to the station, with the reticule on my arm, and—Lord, sir! am I to understand she didn’t get home last night to your dying bed?’

‘You tell me that my daughter came home last night to my dying bed? You come here to tell me that she is not at Cautleigh Hall?’

‘Yes, sir. When that telegram came to call her home——’

‘There was no telegram to call her home.’

‘No, sir. But ’twas she that said so; and she made me pack like the wings of the wind, till I was such that I didn’t know if my reticule was on my head or my heels. But I saw her into the train safe enough, and if she isn’t come home——’

‘She is not come home.’

‘Then all I have to say is, I’ve done my duty, and the Lord knows where she’s got to, for I don’t, wherever she may be!’

‘Come in here,’ said Doyle sharply. She followed him into the library, now sacred to many a day-dream. Without another word, and with every sign of perfect coolness, he looked down every column of that morning’s newspaper, while Mrs. Hassock stood with

folded arms and upcast eyes. 'No,' he said at last, laying the paper down, 'there has been no accident on any line. No telegram was sent, Mrs. Hassock—none. I have not even been ill. What trick is this? Where is my daughter, who was in your charge?'

'Yes, sir, and where's my reticule, and my box, which was in hers? Perhaps, sir, you think I wouldn't have looked after them. But young men that will run off with one thing, won't think twice about running off with another. I'm an honest woman, sir, and I'll thank you to search my box, when it comes to be found.'

'A young man?' thundered Doyle.

'Yes, sir. When a young woman's missing, I've mostly noticed there's a young man missing too. And a young lady's not so different from a young woman as chalk from cheese. Well, sir, I'm glad to find your death-bed's not so near to hand, but when it is, 'twill be a comfort for you to think I always did tell you so.'

Mrs. Hassock did not often lose her temper. But not for the easiest place in London could she have kept it then. And after all, when conscience warns you that a

father of Doyle's fashion is going to charge you with having lost his daughter, the best thing you can do is to begin the battle, and display the standard of right on your own side. 'And what, if you please, am I to say below stairs?' asked she.

Doyle tossed down the newspaper, walked once to the window, and back again. 'In the kitchen? Anything you think most likely to amuse your sex—anything you please! What makes you imagine that such a common occurrence can possibly be anything to me?'

'It was for all as if nobody but his housemaid had gone off without warning,' thought Mrs. Hassock, whom his coolness had struck with a sort of awe, and who by right of her insulted sex, imagined that she could read any man through and through. Doyle, imagining that he could read himself, lighted another cigar, sat down to his monthly accounts, and made them balance to a half-penny.

CHAPTER II

RONAINE AT HOME

PHILIP NELSON did not linger about the door of the house which contained the girl for whose worthless sake he had been forswearing his last possession—his own honesty. So he did not hear the coming or going of the cab that carried her away from the home to which he had been at such pains to bring her. Indeed, he hurried away as if from a den of thieves. He had not probed the family mystery to its core, but that was because his courage was not equal to the exposure from the brink of which he had turned away sickened and dazed, with his hands before his eyes. He had been a traveller, groping and stumbling along an unknown road, who, when the mist clears, finds himself on the edge of an abyss into which another step would have plunged him. We, knowing the secrets of the road, are bound to charge him with

leaping to conclusions too suddenly for a man of sense—if such he can be called who, in cold blood, prefers penal servitude to letting a guilty woman's bad name fall into the mire. But, knowing what he knew of Phœbe, and of Stanislas, and of his father, and knowing nothing of this intangible Doyle, the conclusion was at least as clear as the lantern which was all he had to guide him. How else could that weak, limp, shuffling creature, his father, who had never been more forward with the world than a quarter's bills behind, have suddenly developed into competence of which his own sons could not guess the source or means? Why had he shuffled and prevaricated about Phœbe's disappearance? Philip even yet could not ask himself, why had he lied? But if his old neighbour, Stanislas, was the thief and he the receiver, and some arch-rascal of the name of Doyle or anything else were the player in the dark and pulled the strings, then nothing remained a mystery that had happened at Cautleigh Hall. Nothing was more natural than that a foreign rogue, like Stanislas, should be the active agent of some master-thief, and should have deliberately netted such useful accomplices as a foolish

householder over the ears in debt, and a quick-witted girl to whom nature had given the art of acting any part she pleased. 'And if this were so,' thought Phil, 'no wonder that I was in their way—and I have saddled my own shoulders with the crimes of a gang of thieves.' That was his way of naming Phœbe now. It would take him a great many years to become either as young or as old as Doyle.

He no longer asked himself if there was anything to do, for anything that anybody could do must needs be wrong. He was not in the least torn between the conflicting claims of private tenderness and public duty, for, while feeling bitterly harsh towards his own household, he did not care for the public interest a single straw. Perhaps few people do, when the public interest does not happen to be at least a little their own. At any rate, he would have felt callous to the theft of the Koh-i-Noor itself if he could only have been assured that neither his father, nor his enemy, nor the girl whom he—say hated, instead of a yet more outrageous word—had nothing to do with the affair. It was even too late to save Phœbe now, with his own father in league with her lover. One thing, indeed, was just

possible—to contrive the arrest or flight of the principal criminal, whoever he might be, and thus break up the gang. But even that, if managed with superhuman tact and skill, would not save Phœbe, and—if managed with no more than one single slip—would end in a general exposure. Indeed, such a desperate resource did not really occur to him. He had given in.

Then he thought of himself, because he was obliged. He knew well enough that Ralph's obstinately and perversely generous belief in the honesty of a self-accused stranger had given him no more than temporary safety from arrest, and that the Urquharts were cast in a less generous or credulous mould than the Bassetts seemed to be. Mrs. Urquhart did not look a woman likely to put up easily and forgivingly with a theft or any other wrong. Clearly, he ought, for freedom's sake, to fly the country while he had time, and before his means for flight were expended. Somewhere abroad he could exercise his profession, the best upon which an overthrown man can fall, and, if that failed him, he could use his hands with the best anywhere. But what would be the use of bread and liberty if

he were not in the way when the limping law at last overtook her to save whom from a few hours' shame he had thrown himself away? One may give up all hope of helping, and yet be unable to tear oneself away from the sight of the ruin that no hands can hinder.

Half with intention, half out of habit, he wandered, by a long and roundabout route, to the lodging off the Strand which he had shared with Ronaine on his return from Russia. He was really more worn out than Phœbe herself, for her anxieties and excitements of that varied day had been but skin-deep compared with Phil's. As to seeing or not seeing his old comrade, he had no wish either one way or the other. Everything was indifferent, so long as it was outside the one great trouble, though it would never have occurred to him to emulate Doyle by making a sum in compound addition prove to him that he was his own master, and a man. However, the chink of light between Ronaine's door and the floor of the second landing was not unwelcome, so he knocked and entered.

'Bless the bones,' cried the doctor, starting up, 'if it isn't yourself, or the ghost of ye! If I haven't been thinking of ye this hour, and

wondering when I'd be called to your funeral—I thought ye'd soon have enough of the fens. Here, take some hot physic at once ; ye look this minute as if ye'd brought back half an ague.'

'Yes, I'm back,' said Phil, taking what Ronaine called hot physic with an uncharacteristic readiness that made his physician stare. 'Can you let me lie down on your sofa for to-night? I'm about as tired as a dog can be.'

'No, Phil, ye can't do that, because the sofa's my own kennel—it's good for the brains to lay hard and cool, and the brains are my capital, ye know. But I believe there's a bed somewhere in the other room, and ye can lie in that for as long as ye please. But what's brought ye back? Nothing wrong?'

'No,' said Phil. 'What should there be wrong?'

'Perhaps ye're right. Barring the extraordinary dearth of disease, I don't know that the world's much more black than it's painted. Ah! Russia's the country after all; I had a whole patient there, all to myself, and that's more than half the practitioners in London can say in their lives. Ye gave me a big case,

out there, Phil—and if ye don't take care ye'll be giving me another here, and a bigger. 'Twas kill or cure then—faith, 'twill be cure and kill here, if ye don't mind. What is it, my boy? Don't ye begin to feel your head splitting, and a shiver in the marrow of your bones?'

'I'm all right,' said Phil. 'You're a good fellow, Ronaine—I want to say that——'

'Faith, and ye shall, for it's true. I can perform a crucial operation, any ye like, with any man alive—and I will too, as soon as I get the chance of half a one. I'll begin now. I'll trepan ye, Phil, and vivisect ye, both in one. It's no good trying to cheat death and the doctor,' he said, taking a good dose of his own prescription. 'Ye've got something on your mind—and it'll have to come off, before ye're five minutes farther gone.'

'We've all got something on our minds,' said Phil.

'Yes—all that have got minds to have something on. I've a lot on mine; none more; worse luck, anyhow. I've got nearly fifty years, my boy, and more grey hairs than you've brown ones, and many an old story, and not enough patients—and many an old

song. And here's the tune of the best of them, anyhow:

'Though divvle a halfpenny hides in your pocket,
And your back be as bare as the shine of a shell,
And your life an ould rope—bother luck, but ye'll mock it!
Ye've the divvle's own luck, if ye've someone to tell!

So out with it, and off with it—if there's one thing I can't do, it's talk; if there's one thing I can, it's listen, without putting in a word—barring a good one. Come, is it money?'

'No.'

'Is it Phœbe? Ye see I've not forgot the name.'

'I tell you, Ronaine, it's nothing. Nothing that talking will mend. I only want a dose of sleep.'

'Ah, then it is Phœbe! If there's anything but love or money that can really bother a man, after his first examination, I don't know the name to call it by. So here's her bad health, anyhow, and bad luck to the lot of her. I'm glad it's not money, though, for though I'd have dipped into my little girl's fortune at a pinch, it happens just at the minute to be rather low.'

'I suppose you think——'

‘Think? Not I. If I’d been given that way, I’d not be the man I am. I don’t think ye’ve got something on your brain over and above what Nature put there; I know. And I’ll have it off before I’ll let ye shut an eye.’

‘Then I’ll tell you,’ said Phil, ‘and get over it. I’ve given up my work and my situation, and I’m generally at sea, that’s all.’

‘And it’s something to have had a situation to give up, and it’s a great deal to be anywhere. I’m generally at sea myself—I may say always; but it doesn’t make me behave like a bear to my friends. If that’s all, throw care to the winds, and let to-morrow alone for taking care of itself at least as well as to-day. Here, take another dose, and slap bad luck on the back, and be a man! There’s plenty of people this day worse off than you, with only yourself to work for. I suppose ye mean your firm have been bursting up with the rest? These are bad times, I can tell ye, for the people that have got anything to lose; better luck for them that have none!’

‘Burst up? No. What do you mean?’

‘What, you a financial man, and not heard of the great smash that’s been scaring

the City out of its seven senses? That's queer. Faith, it's a narrow escape I had myself, for I might have invested Zenobia's fortune in that very thing, and lost every penny of it—all the savings of a lifetime, my boy! But ye don't seem to care. It's given me quite a turn, thinking what might have been!'

'And what has gone?' asked Phil, forcing an appearance of interest in what could not possibly concern Phœbe. 'Not the Bank of England, I suppose?'

'Ye'd think it was, though, from the way some of the fellows were going on at the Old Grey Mare. It is a bank, though—the Golconda—and I've been in India, and I know pretty well what that'll mean. Just think if I'd been in that—why, I'd have been as clean cleaned out as I am now! But the little girl's fortune's all right; 'tis in the Bank of the Future, my boy, that would swallow up the Bank of England forty times, and then want more. But as I'm safe and you're not bit, we can smile down from the heights of emptiness at the bursting of pockets all over the air. Can't ye get up a laugh, now, at a widow, Phil, or an orphan, that some steady fellow,

as it might be you or me, thought he'd left comfortable for life, and'll now have to go to the workhouse, or to the bad, or to the worse, maybe? Ye've heard of the Golconda—it'll be the biggest game in smashes this many a day.'

'You've odd ideas of fun, Ronaine.'

''Twas you I thought would have that laugh in ye—not me. When a man takes to crying over himself, sure he's first cousin to a hyæna. Come, out with it, man! If ye sit down and cry because ye've lost a good place, if it was the Queen's, ye're no patient of mine.'

'You are a good fellow, Ronaine,' said Phil, 'and I understand what you mean. But there's nothing to tell. I only turned up here because I felt beat, and because—well, may be because you're you, and are what you seem, and say what you mean. You'll find me better to-morrow, I dare say.'

'If you're not, I'll know the reason why.' He rose, not over steadily, and, having carried Phil's empty tumbler to a corner of the room, brought it back and brewed in it another dose of his favourite medicine. 'There, drink that!' said he. 'Poor young fellow!' he said

to himself, while pulling off his scarcely conscious friend's boots and getting him between the not over clean sheets in the next room, as comfortably as his weight allowed. 'He's in a mess, and he's the sort of fellow it'll take a team of elephants to get out again. And it isn't more than half Phœbe, unless Phœbe's Latin for a bailiff and Greek for a dun. Well, I've made sure of a good night for him, anyhow. 'Tis wonderful how some fellows, not wanting for sense either, will bother themselves over debts they can't pay. If they can't, they can't—it's bad enough to bother one's creditors, without bothering one's own self besides.' He took a final night-cap and presently stretched himself on the horse-hair sofa, where he slept with a peaceful soundness that neither a good conscience nor a full purse can ensure—as few sleep save children, and murderers the night before they are hanged.

When he woke, he went quickly into the bedroom, where he found Phil sleeping like a log, without having changed the position in which he had been laid at least seven hours ago. Although Ronaine knew how to sleep, his waking hour was never a pleasant

one, and required a certain amount of artificial pulling together. The scene on which the pale new sun tried to shine in a feeble way was altogether anything but agreeable. The room was littered about in an indescribable way with all such matters as gather about an inveterate rolling stone, which he shoots down pell-mell whenever he happens to pause in his rolling—even his clothes, such as he had, preferred stray chairs to drawers, and, while everything had been unpacked, nothing had been put away. The learning of the physician was not represented by books, while instruments appeared to have been taking random walks all over the place, in order that they might, when wanted, be at hand as little as possible. Black bottles that certainly did not contain common physic stood in the most unlikely places, from the threadbare hearthrug to the patch of floor-cloth just within the door. And in the midst, the lord of this chaos, unwashed and half dressed, stood and yawned beside the sofa from which he had just thrown the horse cloth that had covered him. It was not wonderful that patients should not crowd round a physician who had certainly

saved at least one man from the jaws of the grave.

The room had degenerated to a remarkable extent during the days of Phil's absence, considering how few they had been. But Ronaine's talent for disorder was simply grand ; order and comfort would very likely have made him pine away and die. Here, he revelled to his heart's desire in dust and muddle ; and yet, as I have said, he was never quite himself for the first hour after waking. Take things as he would, during that hour he could not forget that he had been waiting for his grand chance until the real grand chance had gone away in the shape of youth, and had not waited wisely, and that any day the distance between his hand and his mouth might widen too far for his hand to cover. He could not help remembering the all-embracing ambition of his youth, which nothing was large enough to satisfy, and realising that the first touches of old age were falling upon him, and finding him still at the starting-place, or even a little behind. Esdaile had not, indeed, succeeded in distancing Raphael, but he had achieved sufficient fame to ensure unfailing competence by the time that middle age had

sobered the expectations of his friends. Charley Bassett had developed into a state from which he could afford to look down upon ordinary success as an insignificant thing. Even Urquhart, regarded by all his friends as a butt and blockhead, was a risen light in his profession, and might end as Lord Chancellor, for anything that Ronaine's knowledge of how the woolsack is reached enabled him to tell. 'And I'm the only one of the old set, not counting that thundering black-guard Jack Doyle, poor fellow! that's left at the bottom. Well, I suppose the worst thing a man can be born with is too much brains.'

Ronaine was not subject, except when half awake, to the deadly sin of envy, and he would not have been touched by the most passing spasm of it had he been able to see what had really happened to each and all of his old friends. Esdaile was no doubt a success; but the cold perseverance, the patience, and the prudence he had paid for success were a price from which the unsuccessful man would have recoiled, and would have made him hug his failure as the better

thing. Urquhart's open sesame had been Mrs. Urquhart's wedding-ring. Sir Charles Bassett was in daily dread of the downfall of his fortune and of his hopes, and of seeing them collapse like a house of cards. And Doyle, so far from being happily at rest in the grave, had become—first, a miser; then, a fool; then, a bankrupt in new-born trust and hope; and now, and lastly, a victim of the collapse of the great Bank of Golconda.

In the midst of that ruin, Ulick Ronaine—not having invested one farthing of Zenobia's dowry therein—might indeed feel himself one of Fortune's favourites after all.

CHAPTER III

‘CE N’EST QUE LE PREMIER PAS.’

‘No father, no brother, no lover, no friend, no enemy, any more!’ Phœbe had sighed on learning that she was absolutely nothing ; not even so much as Jack Doyle’s daughter. Why a stranger should have paid thousands of pounds for the pleasure of her company was hard to understand, but certainly not harder than anything else that had happened to her since Stanislas Adrianski had first wished her good-evening in the old back garden. She gave the cabman his orders for Harland Terrace and then, alone at last, fell to thinking—really thinking, almost for the first time that such a thing had happened to her. It was all the harder work, because her thoughts had to deal with such a troop of shadows, all alike eluding her grasp and chasing one another through a mist which was the only substantial thing about them.

It had once, ages ago, been her pride to call herself the child of mystery ; to know that she was a being apart from her brothers and her neighbours, and to look forward to the time when the king, her father, and the prince, her bridegroom, would come in grand procession and carry her away. Well, the fairy godmother had come with her wand, and had struck a father and a bridegroom out of a dead bush, certainly out of nothing else ; and all had promised to be the grandest and most beautiful romance ever put into a book, when the bridegroom turned out to be a Stanislas Adrianski, and the father, no father at all. She had a curious kind of notion in her brain that even the Czar was a phantom, and Siberia nothing more than a name in the air. Perhaps even the Associated Robespierres were no better than a band of ghosts, without any real influence upon the destinies of the living world. But the collapse of her father was the bitterest blow her illusions had yet received. It was a fact, standing out hard among the shadows, that she had been bought and sold like a slave, and treated as one. It was true she had been treated kindly ; but still, she had been bought, and

had been tricked into obedience by the pretence that her purchaser had a right to her beyond what gold could give him, and that—— Her unaccustomed thoughts came suddenly to an end. What if this incomprehensible purchase were not so incomprehensible after all?

‘A slave.’ Her thoughts had reached that, and she had read of slaves; not only slaves in the Siberian mines, toiling among infernal fumes till their living flesh rots away from their bones, but of beautiful Circassians and Georgians who are bought for the pleasure of sultans and pachas; and she knew something of India, although, till the other day, she had never heard of a rupee. Her picture of our Eastern empire was very perfect indeed, and was composed of roses, Thugs, nightingales, tigers, suttees, the Vale of Cashmere, bayaderes, elephants, and the Great Mogul. Where had her father—no; her purchaser—become rich? In India. How? Nobody knew; she had gathered so much worldly knowledge at Cautleigh Hall. No wonder he had kept a young Polish hero at arm’s length, if he were in truth a slave-merchant who had extended his operations

from Circassia to London. She had always thought there was something grim and terrible about the man ; she had often wondered why he went out every day without having any apparent business, and what he found to do in the library every morning all alone. But if he were engaged in collecting victims for the sewn-up sack and the widow's pyre !

It was an idea. But it was better than a dead bush ; and, given the very deadeast of broken sticks, Phœbe could make it into a whole forest in the twinkling of an eye, her fancies were so hydra-like in their way of springing up as soon as they were cut down, fresh and new. And yet this idea did not come to her quite in the old way. There was something real and reasonable about it—not romantically attractive, as had been the story of Stanislas, now, it was to be hoped, closed for ever. This did not give her the consolation, ever present, except when need for action found her wanting, of feeling like a heroine in the middle of her second volume. Doyle was very real—more real than Olivia ; nearly, if not quite, as real as Phil. In dealing with him, she knew well enough that she would have to do with a master, and

‘Oh!’ she cried out aloud, ‘if only Phil were here to tell me what to do—to make me do it, whether I liked or no; just as he made me go home!’

Considering that Phil was her enemy, the outcry was strange. But had not part of her first despair been, ‘I have no enemy any more’?

But Phil was not there; even he had given her up, and had gone out of her life for ever. Just then the cab came to a stand, and the driver let down the window and looked in. Had she arrived? And what was to happen now?

‘I beg your pardon, miss,’ said the man, ‘but I’ve forgot the exact name of that terrace—it’s somewhere about here I know.’

Thought is proverbially quick; it is indeed quicker, in some brains, than anything in the world but one. That one thing is the process by which a woman leaps to the bottom of the stairs, while the quickest-minded man is taking no more than three steps at a time. When Phœbe saw anything at all, it was the whole thing at once, all round it, and all through it, and all that it was not, as well as all that it might be. Had she been an

astronomer, she would perhaps have failed to see the visible side of the moon, but she would assuredly have drawn a very accurate map of the side which no mortal eye has ever seen or will ever see ; as a mathematician, she might have failed to make three straight lines enclose a space, but she would have succeeded to admiration with two.

So Harland Terrace was somewhere about there ; which meant that, close by, was a man who, with no shadow of right, had bought her obedience for only one purpose that her wildest fancy could conceive. That very day, while on the way to the station from Cautleigh Hall, and again while in the train, there had come into her mind the idea of flight in a very definite shape indeed. One by one, since then, she had been slipping the links which kept her from some free world to which she belonged by right of nature ; for she had not lost herself in Olivia in vain. Mrs. Hassock had dropped out of sight, Phil had given her up, nobody expected her at home. For the first time in her whole life she was free ; and nobody would miss her if she was never seen again, though no doubt her purchaser would miss the price he had

paid for her. Surely she would deserve the sack and the bowstring ten times over if her courage failed her now. No ; nobody could want her, except in the capacity of the slave she had always been—not even Phil. There was a sort of fearful joy in feeling that for once, and at last, she was free from even his seemingly omnipresent strength of hand and will, though she would have given up liberty at his command with scarcely the form of a sigh. At any rate there was no other law that she would obey—two tyrants she could not and would not own. She thought of Phil, and seemed to borrow some strength from the thought of him wherewith to break the last of her chains. Oh, what might not any sort of life be, hard or soft, large or small, in which she would see nobody who knew of her any more !

But there stood the cabman, waiting for orders. To him, Phœbe's mental leap in the dark had not taken an instant ; to her, it had not taken two. There was time, before he could fancy himself unheard, to ask, 'But where shall I go ?' and to more than half answer it by remembering that she was not penniless for the moment, thanks to Phil.

There were inns in London where she could sleep for the night, or at least, if she were too worn out to sleep, to wait for the cool light of another day. She would not even commit herself by passing the night from home, since her return was unexpected by the man who had cheated her of the duty owed to the father whom she had never known.

One useful thing she had learned from her years of weekly combats with gas-bills and milk-bills—namely, the value of small sums, and how to make them stretch to the very end of their tether. She could not suppose that the two or three pounds, so far as she could remember their number without counting, would not be enough to last her till—till what? Well, anyhow till they were gone.

‘I want to go,’ said she, with a firm voice but a beating heart, ‘to an hotel.’

‘Hotel, miss? I thought it was “terrace” you said when I took you up—and here I’ve been coming out of my road, may be a matter of miles, and my horse getting as beat as beat, and no wonder. It ain’t my fault, nor his, when a lady don’t speak plain.’

‘I’m very sorry, I’m sure,’ said Phoebe.

‘But—but I only want to go somewhere for the night; any hotel that’s pretty near will do.’

‘Well, miss—it’s not my fault when a lady don’t know her own mind. ’Twas Harland Terrace you said—I remember now.’

‘Never mind that,’ said Phœbe, now feeling it absolutely impossible to go back to the house which was her home no longer. ‘I’ve changed my mind. It’s too late, and I’m not expected,’ she went on, with suspicious anxiety, feeling that some excuse was needed even to a chance cabman for the only bold thing she had ever done, except in her own mind. ‘I must go to an hotel. There’s a large one at the station, isn’t there? and if we’re near—Harland Terrace,’ she said, hurrying over the name as if it bit her, ‘it can’t be far. I’ll go there.’

‘Just as you please, miss,’ said the cabman; ‘only if you change your mind again, don’t say it’s my fault, that’s all.’

The deed was done. She wished that she had never mentioned Harland Terrace; but, at any rate, she had not given the number of the house, and she could leave the hotel long

before any inquiries could be made—even before the news could reach her purchaser that she had escaped from Cautleigh Hall. And now that the deed was really done, and done, as she meant with all her might, beyond recall, her fear fell asleep, and her spirits rose. No more Stanislas, no more Phil; all the shadows behind her, and an open untried ocean, with every wave a hope, stretching full before.

At last she reached the door of the hotel. It was not yet midnight, and she was dazzled and bewildered, in more than one sense, by the glare of the hall. For a moment she did not know what to say or what to do, and her old shyness, when brought face to face with common things, returned in full force upon her. Nothing would have surprised her less than to feel Phil's hand laid upon her arm—she would not have started. And when this fancy passed, and her eyes recovered from the sudden glare, what would the waiters think of her? What would the landlord or landlady say to her? What sort of inquiries were made in great hotels? For she felt sure that there was something about her, and about the manner of her coming, that must reflect

the strangeness she felt upon passing what was not merely the threshold of an inn, but of a whole new world. If Phil had been there, she knew perfectly well that her whole adventure would have melted into air. It was almost a disappointment rather than a relief when she found that a young lady, well-dressed, and travelling with a very respectable amount of luggage, was received as indifferently as if such arrivals happened every hour.

It was amazing how easily everything seemed to go now that the first step—Phœbe's first real step alone—had once been made. She was not the first of her sex to find out, by pleasant experience, that nobody, not even a seasoned rolling-stone like Ronaine, finds unfamiliar travel so smooth as a young woman who travels alone and has never travelled before. Poor men have to shoulder their way, or go to the wall; rich men have to pay their way willingly, or be made to pay it against their will. But a girl has only to be—for your waiter has always a knightly heart, though he knows by sad experience that no true woman ever parts, except under compulsion, with small change. She who swallows golden camels daily will strain at one gnat,

while her brother will, without a thought, swallow silver gnats equal in weight to six camels. Phœbe hardly knew what orders she gave ; for that matter, she could have sworn she had given none, beyond a 'yes' and a 'no.' And yet, while Phil was swallowing Irish whisky, adulterated with narcotics, in Ronaine's den, the adventuress for whom he had been breaking his life was, to her eternal shame as a heroine, making up for the loss of her dinner in Lincolnshire by a midnight supper in London. With all her faults, Phœbe had never fancied starvation a virtue, and Mrs. Hassock's sandwiches were a very old story now.

How long was yesterday? How long is it since Phœbe met Stanislas under the terrace at Cautleigh Hall? Barely four-and-twenty hours had passed since then, when Phœbe opened her eyes in the London hotel to which chance had carried her. Within four-and-twenty hours she had tried to save a Polish proscrip from the knout and the Siberian mines, had lost her watch and jewels, had travelled to London, had escaped from home, and had found her career; had found that her

father was not her father, and that her enemy was Phil. Four-and-twenty hours! Nay, four-and-twenty years. She had slept, and when she woke she no more knew who she was or where she was, than the caliph who lived a lifetime during the instant between plunging his head under water and lifting it out again.

She lay on in her white over-soft bed luxuriously, thinking over the song of her life with its ever-recurring burden :

‘I am free! No more Stanislas, no more Phil!’

If Phil had given her up to her own devices, she, at any rate, had the revenge of having given up Stanislas, whom she now knew, in her first sensation of perfect freedom, to have been her burden even when honour had forced her to make that hero her pride. Of discovery, as she lay there collecting herself in the same pale sunshine which had made Ronaine miserable for half an hour, she had no longer any fear. Nay, she could not realise that her whole life had not been a dream; and had it not been for Phil she could not have known herself for the same Phœbe who, worn out and fevered with a

day's lifetime, had thought twice before breaking the last of her chains.

Could it be only yesterday morning that she had woke up in fear and trembling at Cautleigh Hall, which had been for weeks her home? It seemed impossible—still more impossible that within six-and-thirty hours had been begun and ended the whole drama which had ended in her being here, and free. So she was never to be ruled by Phil again. . . . There was an end of her luxury, and she sprang from her bed as fresh and healthy as a lark after yesterday's long hours of torture, and as eager to face unknown fortune as an inland-born child to wet its feet with the sea.

But when she had gone through the duty of breakfast, with less appetite than freedom should have given her, and when she had to face the fact that a new day was before her, with at least as many hours in it as that endless yesterday had contained, she felt that those hours were not likely to be in complete accord with her healthy waking. She had to take out her purse, and count the number of sovereigns it contained. There was some silver, but the sovereigns were only three.

And how far would three sovereigns go? She could have reckoned to a halfpenny in the old times, but the gilt mirrors, in which she saw some twenty Phœbes, did not speak of expenses upon the old suburban scale. They might carry her over another day.

‘If Phil were here, he would know where I ought to go and what I ought to do,’ thought she.

But the very thought gave its own answer. He would say ‘Go home.’ No; after all, it was best to be free from Phil.

At any rate she could not remain indoors. Nobody in the house seemed to care what she did, and, though nobody had ever cared, the general carelessness on her account seemed something more complete even than when she had been left by her pretended father to kill the time with old plays.

She knew enough of her own neighbourhood to be aware of her dangerous nearness to Harland Terrace, and enough of her owner’s habits to time her outgoing so as to run the least possible risk of meeting him on her way to she knew not where. The morning’s reflection was so far sound that it had not in

the least affected her views as to the business of her purchase and sale. People do not buy their own daughters—people do buy slaves. There was something excitingly odd in passing by the very end of Harland Terrace, and wondering what her purchaser would think if he could, by some chance, see his escaped slave. But scarcely had she passed the corner where she had once met Stanislas than she caught herself wondering ‘Suppose I should meet Phil?’ and then, having dismissed that fear as too alarmingly good to be true, she set herself deliberately to wonder ‘Where am I going, now that I am out of doors?’

She had read, in more than one of her novels, how the heroine, finding herself alone in the world, goes straight to some great musician, sings to him, and in three days becomes the greatest prima donna in the world. But, alas! Phoebe was not only ignorant of the address of any great musician, but she could not sing. Her accomplishments were Irish snakes; she could not even so much as teach any. Had she been a heroine with a contralto voice, or even a she-villain with a soprano, the gates of the world would

have flown open at the sound. But she could not call to mind a single precedent for a heroine being taken on her own general merits, except by a hero.

She had purposely rambled beyond all the familiar streets, and had reached a more interesting neighbourhood, when the instinct of elective affinity brought her to a stand at a shop-window in which hung, among various rubbish, an engraving of Mrs. Siddons as the tragic muse.

‘Of course I know what I want,’ thought she.

A certain recklessness seized her, born of liberty. There was nothing now that she might not dare. Why should she any longer shudder on the brink, when in London itself the world to which her heart belonged seemed beckoning to her with open arms? It was not the portrait of Mrs. Siddons which had suggested to her the career that had become her own while reading Olivia’s part in ‘Loss and Gain’ at Cautleigh Hall. There was the world into which, as she saw it, daily prose does not intrude—in which one may live all one’s lives at once without fear of waking. Only, how did people begin?

Perhaps Phil would have known. No, Phil would not have known; he never went to plays. She was not even sure that he did not think them wrong. Of course actresses were paid—an important consideration for a girl who had only three sovereigns and some loose silver in the world, and had been robbed of all her trinkets yesterday. And yet were people really paid for living their own lives—all their own lives? That seemed strange. She had always understood that people were paid for mathematics, and law-copying, and washing clothes, and selling milk, and other unpleasant and incomprehensible things. Why should people be paid for doing what they enjoy? ‘Yet one must live,’ she sighed. ‘I think Phil enjoyed his mathematics, and he was paid for them all the same.’

And in short her heart knew, if her head did not, what she had come out to do. Her steps were bent in one direction as surely as a hound's on the scent, and even more surely. Once in her life, and once only, she had seen a play—that never-to-be-forgotten night when the sight of a certain violoncello had spoiled her pleasure for the hour, but had not discoloured a single memory. The name of that

house was now to her what Mecca is to the Mussulman; even more, for it was the only name of the sort that was more to her than merely a name. For other things she might have no courage. But of the entrance to her own true life she had no real fear. She reached that entrance at last, the Phœbe of feeble will, flushed and frightened, but the Phœbe who had found herself, knowing whither she had come and why. She had come to her own place to claim her own.

The daylight look of that house was so forbiddingly dismal that one half of her heart dragged back, while the stronger half, seeing beyond the seeming, drew her on.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. CROSBY

DRAMATIC authors, tragedians, comedians—all persons, in short, whose wits are their only fortune—agree in exactly one thing, and in nothing more: that it is a very hard matter to make the first step over the threshold of the stage-door of a theatre, if one has a comedy in one's pocket or a notion in one's head that one is a born actor. To judge from the universal experience of those who are most concerned, plays and players are about the only properties that a playhouse never requires. It must therefore be set down, if not as wholly inexplicable, yet as unique in the history of the stage, that Phœbe, having yielded to the magnetism of the stage-door, and after scarcely more than half an enquiry of its keeper, met with no more difficulty in obtaining an entrance than if she were already the most famous actress in all London.

She was of course unaware of the full

measure of surprise due to the manner in which the house obeyed her 'Open Sesame.' The effect could not have been more complete had the theatre been built for her, and been waiting for the woman to come, and the hour. Still, she had expected some degree of difficulty—at any rate some half-hour or so of delay, during which she might gather herself together for a first interview with the unknown powers. The ease, almost the hurry, of her admission was bad for her presence of mind. Her real surprise was kept for the everyday aspect of a world which she had been teaching herself to regard as the opposite, in detail as well as in spirit, of that in which nothing had turned out to be real except Phil—and now even he had gone. She was not the first daylight visitor who has been struck by the contrast between the secret regions of a theatre when the sun shines without, and its evening glories; but she was perhaps the very first who honestly expected not to find what she found. What she did expect to find would be impossible to tell; but certainly not dust and darkness which appeared to be as precisely like all common dust and darkness as if they really belonged to the world in which

she had left the sun. It is true there was a hitherto unknown flavour in the air, but it was of an anything but inspiring kind.

During one moment of her progress she was seized by a violent temptation to turn back and run away. But, as was almost always the unhappy lot of her resolutions, it struck her at the very moment when action was the most completely impossible. For just then her guide suddenly stopped in the middle of the passage, tapped at a door, and was answered by a 'Come in.'

Phœbe went in ; or rather, as it seemed to her, was swept in by some force invisible. She knew perfectly well that she had sought the theatre rather as a spiritual exercise than with any fixed purpose ; at any rate, everything in the shape of a purpose went out of her head and left her with only a bewildered sort of consciousness that, last night, or this morning, or once upon a time, she had purposed something which had no doubt been very absurd. And then all the surroundings were so entirely different from any that she had set up for the scene of her fancy, whatever it might have been. If only she had not been let in quite so quickly and easily ! But, whatever

was to happen, and whether she might be able to think of anything to say for herself or of nothing, it was too late to turn back now.

If the room into which she was bidden had been utterly unlike any room she had ever seen in her life, and had she been received therein by some sort of creature the like of which no mortal has ever seen, she would have felt herself a hundred times more at home. But the room was painfully like her father's—no, Mr. Doyle's, study at home—in Harland Terrace, and she was welcomed by the most commonplace of bipeds in a shooting-coat; not even in a suit of armour or oriental robe. Not that she looked for the robe or the mail; only she did not look for the shooting-coat, and, least of all, for the fat and florid young man of a certain age, who dressed so sensibly.

I have said that he welcomed her; indeed, the way in which he hurried forward and held out both his hands was demonstrative to effusion. His hurry, indeed, was so great to give Phœbe fitting welcome as to betray a stiffness of motion very much out of keeping with his extraordinarily fine complexion and luxuriantly black and glossy curls. It seemed

to Phœbe that she could hear the creaking of his joints, and the sound resembled that of whalebone.

‘Now this is really too angelic!’ exclaimed he; and as soon as he spoke even Phœbe, all flurried as she was, had it revealed to her that this lord of life as it ought to be, and of romance made real, was not, whenever he laid himself down to rest, either young, or fine-complexioned, or raven-haired. ‘Pray sit down; try that lounge, it’s a special favourite of mine. I hope you weren’t kept a minute at the stage-door? I left special orders, and if you were kept one quarter of a second I’ll have the scoundrel hanged. Dick, you’re a painter, and you’re a lucky painter, too, to-day. Allow me to introduce you to the most lovely woman in the world, bar none.’

Then indeed did Phœbe wish she had obeyed the instinct which she had mistaken for the cowardly temptation of a feeble will, and flown. If this creature were a madman, as his words implied, he was bad enough; if he were sane, worse still. However, he had said one good thing; by appealing to Dick he had given her the comfort of knowing that she was not alone with this fat man, from whose

face, filled with swaggering admiration, she turned her eyes in the hope of seeing Dick and of finding in him the outcome of a somewhat better mould.

Alas ! no Dick was to be seen. But happily her ears caught the sound of a clothes-brush at work through an open door, and presently he who was presumably Dick appeared—a middle-aged man, who might be what his companion was evidently not, that is to say, a gentleman, with a grave face, a quiet manner, and a cold, but not unpleasant smile. From which of these two strangers had she come to learn her destiny? She hoped it might be Dick. The other it should not be.

‘Oh, there you are!’ said the latter. ‘Dick, my dear boy, you should keep clothes-brushes for after you’ve been down on your bones; it’s waste to work them before, because you’ve got to do it all over again. Madam, allow me to have the honour of introducing genius to beauty. Not that I ought to talk of introducing genius to you, as if you hadn’t got ten times as much of your own. My old friend Dick Esdaile, whom no doubt you know by name and fame. Don’t tell me beauty never goes with genius. Absurd! You may have

genius without beauty—there's yourself, Esdaile—but I don't know my own business if beauty isn't genius. For what's genius if it doesn't pay? Take my word for it, my dear madam, that your beauty and your prestige together are genius; and if they're not, then they're something better—that's all.'

'I gather from what Mr. Marcus says,' said Esdaile, 'that I have the honour of making the acquaintance of Mrs. Crosby? I have heard you were thinking of the stage——'

'I—I am not Mrs. Crosby,' stammered Phoebe. 'I never heard of her. I am not, indeed!'

'What?' cried Mr. Marcus. 'You're not Mrs. Crosby? Then who the dev——'

'Mr. Marcus wishes to ask you, madam,' interrupted Esdaile quietly, 'to what cause he is indebted for your visit? He is very glad to see you, he is sure.'

'Yes. And what blundering idiot had the impudence——'

'You see,' interrupted Esdaile again, 'Mr. Marcus is—quite rightly—a very particular man. The stage-door of this theatre is the strictest kept in all London. I suppose you

were mistaken for Mrs. Crosby—eh? Well, you mustn't complain of being mistaken for the most famous beauty of the—hem!—hour. You see, Marcus shared in the mistake himself, so not even he can complain. Is your business private? I'm just going——'

But Phœbe, who had not even enough courage left to turn round and walk away, threw him an appealing look, which made him smile and take himself no farther away than the window.

Mr. Marcus was evidently vexed and disappointed to the vanishing point of good manners; and yet Phœbe preferred Mr. Marcus as he was to Mr. Marcus as he had been. Indeed, he had been so very detestable at first, and was so very different now, that any other man's worst manners were evidently the best he could assume. Still, it should be said in his favour that Phœbe, confused and frightened, did not look as if the trouble of assuming his peculiar style of courtesy would bring him a farthing's worth of return.

'Well,' he said, 'here you are, and so I suppose you want something. What is it? An order?'

'No,' said Phœbe, forced to find courage

enough to answer, since she had not enough to fly; and, since she had to stand by her guns, compelled to search her wits for guns to stand by. 'I only wanted to be an actress, and I thought——'

'Oh!'

Mr. Marcus managed to compress a volume into that 'Oh!' But Phœbe, though she recognised the feat, was entirely unable to read the volume.

'I thought,' said she, 'that——'

'Well?'

'I don't know exactly what I thought—but—well, I didn't suppose I could get upon the stage by waiting till the stage came to me.'

'Right you are there. I suppose what you mean is, in plain English, you want an engagement. Then why the deuce didn't you go to work in the usual way, and find out that nobody's wanted here, and not waste my valuable time? What made you come to me?'

'I don't know—unless it was because it is the only theatre I know.'

'The only theatre you know? Do you mean to say you aren't even in the pro.?''

‘In the——’

‘In the pro.—in the profession! Well, I’ve heard of such a thing as innocence! So—you don’t happen to know Mrs. Crosby, do you?’ asked Mr. Marcus, with a change of manner; for, after all, Phœbe was really well-dressed, and a suspicion must have risen in his mind that perhaps bad manners might prove bad policy.

‘No.’

‘Ah, a distinguished amateur. I see. Yes, I see at a glance your range of parts—Juliet, Lady Macbeth, the Lady of Lyons, and Nan in “Good for Nothing.” Distinguished amateurs always take a large line, and stick to it. But I’m afraid, Miss—Miss—I don’t think I quite caught the name.’

Doyle? No. Nelson? No. Burden? Why not? It was her nearest approach to a name of her own. It was on the point of her tongue; but then, if Phil was not a playgoer, his brothers were; and if she made this great step into a new world, she must burn her ships, and Phœbe Burden must cease to be. Olivia Vernon, the heroine of ‘Loss and Gain,’ was the only name, sufficiently not her own, that she could call to mind; and, after all, she

was as much Vernon as Burden, and much more than either Nelson or Doyle.

‘Miss Vernon,’ said she.

‘A capital name for the bills. But I’m afraid, Miss Vernon, that there is nothing I can do for you ; nothing at all. Advertise, or go into the country ; that’s the best thing. I presume, as a distinguished amateur, you have means of your own ?’

‘No, I have none. I want to live to act ; but I must act to live, too.’

‘What ? Ye heavenly powers ! And you think,’ he went on, his worst, which was his best, manner returning with the certainty that the possible ambitious amateur was but one of the distressed gentlewoman order, the curse of editors, managers, and publishers, after all—‘you think that because you have played at acting in a drawing-room——’

‘I have never acted anywhere !’ exclaimed Phœbe, feeling something at last that was anything but fear. ‘I am what every actress, the very greatest, has been at some time. And I thought—yes, I know what I thought now. I thought that you—anybody who knows all about the stage—would tell me if I can ever

do well enough for a living, as I hope I can. If I'm wrong, I'll go.'

'By Jove! That speech wasn't half so bad, though, after all. Let me see, I'm not an ill-natured sort of a beast, though you did make your way in under false colours; and you've got a fairish voice, when you put a dash of temper into it, and you haven't got bad eyes when you open them, like you did just now. There's really nothing I can do for you—nothing at all.'

'But you can do something for me,' said Esdaile. 'You can ask Miss Vernon, since she happens to be here—by mistake if you like—to speak something.'

'If a lady who has never acted, can——'

'Very well,' said Esdaile. 'I suppose Miss Vernon didn't come without expecting to be put through her paces. And I'm sure she has too much sense to be afraid of two old fogies like—— I beg your pardon, Marcus; I always forget that the old Helmforth days were only yesterday to you.'

Phœbe felt a lump in her throat, as Mr. Marcus, with a shrug of the shoulders, threw himself back in his chair and closed his eyes. Esdaile came forward ever so little, and

placed himself so that Phœbe might be conscious of a sympathetic presence, without being disturbed by anything in the shape of a stare. Of course it was only right that she should give a sample of her power, and she knew that she ought to be grateful to the only man who, a stranger, was the only one she had ever met who had acted like a friend, save Phil, who was her enemy. So, in spite of the lump, she ran over her favourite speeches, and finally fixed upon Olivia's outburst of passion in 'Loss and Gain'—that outburst with which she had achieved the incredible feat of electrifying Cautleigh Hall.

Alas! she herself knew, before she had spoken a dozen words, that, however she might force herself to fever pitch, the fever would not come. At Cautleigh, she had felt herself actually Olivia; now, she could not feel herself to be anything but a nervous girl with a smothered and trembling voice trying to mimic somebody else's passion, in the hope of being able to earn her daily bread by doing the same thing over and over again. That the soul was in her, Nature had taught her as only Nature can teach those whom she has once inspired; but the soul proved

itself capriciously stubborn, and would not stir, while at the same time she was without any of the practised art which knows how, without feeling, to make others feel. She knew herself to be labouring on without heart or hope, but she did labour on till she reached the miserable relief of the end. She dared not glance towards Esdaile; he did not say a word, but she fancied she read the language of his silence only too well.

‘Very nice,’ said Mr. Marcus, opening his eyes. ‘I think I must have seen that play when I was a child. There are some bits that aren’t so bad in those old comedies, if there was only money in them. And yet there used to be—rum days those must have been. So, Miss Vernon, you’ve never acted on any stage? However, you needn’t tell me that—that’s plain. And you’ve no money, and I’ve no doubt you think yourself a second Siddons. Oh, don’t say you don’t—if you don’t think yourself a first Siddons you’ll never be fit for so much as a walking lady.’

‘I always do tell everybody,’ said Esdaile, ‘that Marcus is really a very sensible man, if he’d only let himself alone. That last remark might have been my own.’

‘Gammon,’ said Mr. Marcus ; ‘and I should judge that you have a taste in dress highly becoming in a lady, but that can hardly be satisfied without the, say, occasional payment of a bill—either with your money or somebody’s money ; of course, that’s nothing to me. No friend, no aged grandmother to keep out of your slender earnings, and all that sort of thing ? That’s all right. Those aged grandmothers, and blind but honest fathers—it’s wonderful what a lot of salary they do manage to absorb. I’ll tell you what I’ll do, and I expect you’ll call it a confounded good-natured thing, considering that you’ve got no money, and no friends, and no experience, and not much talent, and a face that, though it’s well enough for practical purposes and would make up well, isn’t exactly your fortune, like Mrs. Crosby’s is hers—confound her, for it ought to have been mine ! I’ll take you on as extra walking lady at a nominal salary till I see how I like you, and what stuff you’re made of. There, Miss Vernon. I don’t believe you’ll find another manager in London like me. What’s your address ? I’ll take it down.’

Phœbe felt that the real insults of Mr.

Marcus were not in his words but in his eyes, and instinct told her that his looks were insults, though all her reading did not suffice to explain their nature and meaning. 'Thank you, I won't trouble you,' said she, as if in one short hour she had grown into a woman who can read character and knows how to hold her own, so constantly was some new and unexpected Phœbe appearing on the scene. 'I beg your pardon for coming to trouble you—I won't come again.'

She did not wait for an answer, but, all abashed and mortified, found, and then lost, and then found again, her way to the stage-door, and returned into the prose of streets, and common life, and common sunshine. She was ready to cry, not out of despair of bread-winning, but over the loss of the illusion concerning life behind the scenes, upon which she had staked all her hopes of finding something at once great and real. It was very bitter, and she could not guess—being bad at logic—that Mr. Marcus was a rather peculiar man.

'Miss Vernon, I beg your pardon,' said Esdaile, overtaking her before she had left the

stage-door many yards behind, 'but have you no friends?'

'No, not one,' said she.

'Many people say that, and think it too, who have the most and the best of friends. Don't be afraid of me. I've got a notion that you've quarrelled with your family, and run away from home. Is it so? Don't be afraid, I'm not going to tell, until you please.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Phœbe bitterly, 'there is nobody to tell. I can't quarrel with my family or run away from home. I have no family—no home. I only want to earn my bread.'

'And they give you a stone. Of course they do. They that want to eat bread must grind their own corn. I'll tell you something about yourself, and I won't call you Miss Vernon, for it's no more your name than its mine. I think you're a good girl, and I believe your speaking the truth now, though whether you always think the truth I'm by no means sure. How it happens that a good girl, who tries to be true, suddenly finds herself without name, or friends, or home, and calls on Old Marks—I mean young Marcus—of all men, to give her a living, I'm

not going to ask, because I mean to make you tell me of your own accord. I want to use you—to get something out of you. I, like you, have to grind my own corn. I'm a painter, and I've been looking for a pair of eyes exactly like yours ever since I once saw them in somebody else. Mind, I don't say I particularly admire them, for the simple reason that I don't; but if you'll give me the chance of earning a hundred pounds or so by turning you into an impossible picture with a fancy name—Zenobia, say, or Psyche. Why do you start? Everything, you know, is in a name—you shall have a better chance of bread in an honest way than poor old—
young Marks knows how to give Mrs. Crosby. There are managers in London—and particularly out of London—more lovely by far, though the devil's by no means so black as he chooses to paint himself—more fool he. Do you mind giving a hungry painter a sitting or two—say to-morrow, at eleven, to begin?'

'Who is Mrs. Crosby?' asked Phœbe—without the faintest reason, and yet with every reason; and, without the least desire to know, hungry to know.

‘Eh? But you are a woman, Miss Vernon, whatever else you are. Mrs. Crosby is—Mrs. Crosby. Everybody says she is the most beautiful woman in England. And what everybody says, I, also, always say. And therefore I have a reputation for practical wisdom, which I amply deserve. Will you trust yourself to-morrow with me? Here is my card, with my address, if you will—yes? Then let my card be our bond. You see how I trust you; I don’t ask for yours.’

Phœbe was indeed falling back upon her womanhood; there was something about this dry, elderly, cold-tongued painter that, with the wildest want of reason, reminded her of passionate, hot-headed, slow-tongued Phil. Driven back upon herself, she longed to obey somebody who seemed honestly strong, and she, for the mere relief’s sake, obeyed. Esdaile, being a cynic, was not strong; but, being a cynic, he seemed strong; and, being something more than only a cynic, was not very far from what he seemed.

So she returned to her hotel, trusting to luck to pay the margin of the bill, and sat down, and cried.

‘There was a famous French detective,’ thought Esdaile, moved by the spirit to look up Ronaine, ‘who held that to have once seen a man’s eyes is to recognise that man for evermore.’

CHAPTER V

ZENOBIA

THOUGH he hardly expected it, Esdaile found his friend at home. 'Ye see,' the latter explained, 'I haven't yet got up my visiting connection, so I make a point of not going out till twilight. If anything happens in the neighbourhood, and a doctor's wanted, they're bound to come to me. And the chances aren't so bad; the Strand's close to the Temple, and a duchess might have to see her lawyer, and her carriage might break down on the way home; and with that sort a small accident takes a deal of mending. But what are you losing the sunshine for yourself? I thought you painters could never get out in the day-time, except by fog-light.'

'No more we can—except when we want anybody to do something for us, and then we come out and look him up, just like the rest of the world. I'm glad I found you in,

because I want to get something out of you.'

'Help yourself, then. There's the bottle. And, faith, nobody will be able to get so much as a drop of that out of me if that duchess don't happen to break down pretty soon.'

'No, thank you, I won't drink; but I'll drink her very bad health the next time I do. Do you remember our meeting some time ago at *The Mare*? Not the last time—there are reasons why your memory should be incapable of that—but the first time after you came back from Russia. We then spoke, I remember, for the only time, of that child that we put out to nurse——'

'Of Zenobia?'

'Of Eve. You were going to look her up, I remember.——'

'And so I was; and so I am, too! But what makes you ask about her now? I thought ye'd all washed your hands of her but me.'

'What you said struck me very much, Ronaine. I've got a sort of hazy notion that perhaps I made myself answerable, after all, for something more than those boot-bills. You've not looked her up yet, then?'

‘Ye see, I’ve been so busy with my practice—waiting for it, ye know—that to-morrow’s never been able to come. But ’twill come, Esdaile, never fear. Everything comes to them that wait, ye know.’

‘Why, Urquhart himself was never such a philosopher—certainly never such a consistent one. But, though Urquhart was a great philosopher, it always struck me that Mahomet was a greater. If to-morrow won’t come to you, go to to-morrow. To-day was to-morrow yesterday——’

‘Faith, there’s something in that, too. Ye mean, why wouldn’t we look up Zenobia, poor little thing, this very hour?’

‘Why not? That duchess may break down—to-morrow.’

‘And the poor little thing’s fortune will be made off-hand! No, Dick; as it may be so soon, I’ll not go to her till I can go in my own pill-box—my own brougham, ye know; and then, why I will. And when Ulick Ronaine says he will——’

‘Not all the powers on earth can make him. Say you won’t Ronaine—and that you may go to her to-morrow, find out what’s become of her to-day. I can’t go myself;

they'd be sending me in a boot-bill fifteen years long. And the fact is, I should be ashamed. That old innocent, the admiral, would ease me of all my loose silver as sure as I stand here. But I fancy, Ronaine, that in dealing with you the easing would have to be the other way. It's not a step from here to Gray's Inn. You've only got to ask of those lawyers—Mark and something—what's become of the admiral; you needn't mention me. And, by the way, old fellow, I mustn't forget to repay you that five pounds you lent me the last time we met at The Mare. I'll settle that as soon as you've been to Gray's Inn.'

'You're joking, Dick! I lent you five pounds at The Mare?'

'Out of Marion Eve Psyche Zenobia Jane's fortune. Of course I didn't suppose you'd remember. As I said before, there was reason in The Mare's milk why you shouldn't remember trifles of that kind.'

'If ye'd said I lent you five pounds out of my own money, I'd have said 'twas you were drunk, Dick, and not I. But since 'twas out of my little girl's fortune, that's another pair of shoes entirely; and 'twould be a fraud to

say, if I was sober as a judge, that I wasn't as drunk as a lord. As ye say, five pounds is but a trifle; but not of five farthings will my little girl be defrauded by me. So—— But no, Dick. I can't stir. There's my patients——'

'I dare say it won't hurt them to wait for an hour.'

'Much you know of the noble calling of medicine, Dick, if ye can say that when there's one of them waiting for me in the next room.'

'What—you have a patient then?'

'A most important case, old man, that I daren't leave for an hour. I've put him in my own bed and narcotised him, and seen him through a typhoid that would have killed the very Wandering Jew, and that I'll maybe have to see through a big thing in brain-fevers before I've done with him. He'd be a fortune to any man——'

'Does he pay?'

'As if I'd take a dirty penny from a fine young fellow that's as good as an entire education in medicine and surgery——'

'I see. You're a queer fellow, Ronaine. If that duchess does break her neck at the nick of time, you'll just seize that very mo-

ment to be peremptorily engaged with some penniless poor devil who's better out of the world than in. Look here! I'm hanged if I pay my debts to a fellow who won't step as far as from the Strand to Holborn to recover them.'

'Maybe, then, I'd sue ye at law, Dick—not for my own sake, for what's a five-pound note, or a fifty, between friends? But for the little girl——'

'No, you won't.'

'Well, then, anyhow, ye shan't say that Ulick Ronaine wasn't the man to do a friendly thing. Ye're the only living man that ever borrowed from me, and I won't be ungrateful—I'll go, since ye're so set on easing your conscience at second-hand. Faith, it's all of us ought to have bad consciences about the poor little thing but me. But ye'll have to look after my patient, Dick. If he gets up and wants to go out, knock him down, and —— But ye might as well try to floor Goliath. Faith, if 'twas a set-to between doctor and patient, 'twould be six to one against the doctor. If he wakes up mad—— But I have it. "Fast bind, fast find." I'll turn the key.'

‘Are you serious? Do you mean that you’ve got a madman on your hands?’ asked Esdaile a little nervously, and beginning to wish that he had not been quite so anxious to employ the doctor as a detective.

‘Anyhow, he won’t harm ye now,’ said Ronaine, in whose native language the word mad applies rather to the short madness of anger than to the longer, but not more real, forms of lunacy; ‘may be I’ll be back before he wakes; and then if he’s troublesome, we’ll be two to one.’

Philip Nelson did indeed sleep long. He had been more utterly worn-out even than Phoebe, and scarcely needed Ronaine’s no doubt judicious dose of artificial sleep to keep him from waking for the whole four-and-twenty hours. He did, in fact, achieve full fifteen, and woke to some bodily discomfort and to an absolute forgetfulness of everything he had ever known, down to his own very name and identity. And when, after some slight effort, he remembered these, yesterday was a blank, and the place where he was lying a mystery. The room did not seem wholly unfamiliar, but only in such fashion as

the strangest places may suggest the idea of one's having known them, or their likenesses, in some other state of being. The cloud of some great trouble hung over him, but even this was felt only, not seen. It was not till the name of Phœbe woke in him that all other things woke also.

As to her, all that he could do had been done ; the best he could do henceforth was to leave her free. No strength could save a girl whom lover and guardian had trained into an actress who could not have become so great had she not learned her part willingly indeed. If he called justice to his aid, to what penalty for unknown crimes might he not expose his father, and one who had been his sister long ago ? If he could sift the mystery, and strike at its master spirit—for some master spirit there seemed to be—that would not save Phœbe from Stanilas ! and from herself, it was clear, she was utterly past saving. He felt all the despair, without an equal among all despairs that are, of a man capable of bearing all things and of doing all things, anxious and burning to bear and to do them all, but driven to know that there is nothing to be borne—nothing to be done.

‘I must look out for myself,’ thought he ; ‘any way, transportation for robbery will help nobody now ; and I suppose the police aren’t such blockheads as to stop, in their enquiries, at me. There will be my father to look into, and I can’t make myself answerable for who knows how many robberies that have been going on while I was dying in Russia—like a fool. If I hadn’t been a fool, I shouldn’t have stopped at dying.’

But there was a despair for him even beyond despair. It was the knowledge that he could not take back himself, or change what had become his own nature ; that Phœbe, hated, must still always be more to him than all the rest of the world. That would be a heavy weight to carry to his grave—a demon of loyalty to a woman who was unworthy of any man’s liking. He rose to face the new day, and made the best sort of rough toilet that Ronaine’s bed-chamber allowed.

‘I don’t suppose the Urquharts will take young Bassett’s instincts for much evidence,’ thought he ; ‘but even with the help of the telegraph they won’t have tracked me here yet awhile. And I’m a stranger to the police

—so far. I ought to be able to clear out of England easily enough, if I don't let the scent lie too long. But, holloa! the door locked, and the key outside? What good intentions is Ronaine up to now? Ronaine!' he called out, striking the door with his fist. He repeated the shout and the blow with double and then with treble force, but nobody answered.

'Now what can the fellow mean by making me a prisoner in this way?' thought he. 'If he had to go out, I'm not in his custody that he should want to hinder my going out too. And jokes are certainly not in his line. The door is certainly locked. I'm not dreaming there, though I shouldn't have thought, out of a dream, that Ronaine had a lock and key that would act in harmony. No, it can't be that I have been tracked here. I shouldn't have been locked up in a bed-room without a guard. But——'

If he had been guilty that 'but' would not have been so long in coming; if Phœbe had not destroyed his faith in all women for her sake, and, therefore, all the more utterly, in all men, it would not have come at all. But it did come, though slowly. What did

he know of Ronaine after all? Why should he think a drunken and by no means high-principled adventurer should be proof against the reward that had no doubt by this time been published outside every police-station in London? Apart from this there could be no possible reason for detaining a friend and guest in this outrageous way. But if he was thus kept safe while Ronaine, at his wit's end for means to raise the wind, was putting himself in communication with the Urquharts or with Scotland Yard, there was reason enough and to spare.

Phil felt no shame for his mistrust of the one man, save Ralph, who had ever been his friend. According to his experience, it is by those in whom we believe most that we are most likely to be betrayed.

‘But, as there seems to be nobody on the other side of the door,’ he thought, ‘it seems to depend more on the prisoner than on the gaoler how things are to go. One doesn’t need to be a second Brunel to make a tunnel through the work of a London builder.’

And, to Esdaile’s discomfiture, he would certainly have been as good as his word, if his extemporised battering-ram had not been

stayed by the sound of voices in the next room.

‘Well?’ asked Esdaile.

‘Ye may set your conscience easy,’ said Ronaine; ‘you and everyone of us but me. To think I’ve been putting by every guinea I could get together, to see this day!’

‘It’s clear enough you’ve been somewhere, Ronaine.’

‘To Mark & Simple’s; where else would I go?’

‘And you asked for the admiral?’

‘And who else would I be asking for? I saw young Mark, or else young Simple, and he’s left the firm—the admiral, I mean. He came into a fortune—some men do have the devil’s own luck, to be sure. So I asked if anything was known of that little girl.’

‘Well?’

‘I hardly know how to break it to ye, Dick—faith, I can’t break it to her father, and that’s myself, at all. For there’s none that’s been a real father to her but me, and now she’s dead!’

‘Dead?’

‘Yes, Dick—as a herring; and there’s nobody left me but myself to live for now.’

‘I can’t believe it. I saw her own eyes, with mine, this very day.’

‘Pooh ! how can ye see a girl’s eye without seeing the girl ? And the girl, being underground, ye couldn’t see. She died before he left the firm—well, I’ll be able to see her tombstone, anyhow. ’Tis wonderful what that girl’s been to me—the best of daughters, Dick ; and now she’s gone, just when everything was going to turn out so well. But ’tis the way of the world.’

‘And how does young Mark, or young Simple, know ?’

‘Well enough. He knew of the girl, and there were enquiries being made after her by some big lawyer’s wife.’

‘Her natural relations ?’

‘Her unnatural relations, more likely ; but it’s all one now. So he asked the admiral, and she’s as dead as Queen Anne. I’d like to have the neck of her medical man, for just a minute, between my finger and thumb ; I’d teach him what compression of the larynx means in that one minute, Dick, better than any other surgeon could in two.’

‘Poor Eve Well, then, I was mistaken, that’s all. I always thought there was a

good deal of romance in those detective stories, and I'm a trifle disappointed too. One never likes to find one's self wrong, especially when one would have pledged one's professional reputation on being the other thing. I'm afraid we gave her too many names. There's the trifle I owe you, and many thanks for the loan.'

'And what'll be the good of the dirty money to me now? But I'll take it for the minute; 'twill go towards a monument.'

'Of the failure of good intentions?'

'No, of marble, Dick; Carrara. A girl like that deserves a big thing. But ye didn't know her, Dick.'

'No. Did you?'

'Did I know her? Did I know the girl that I'd nursed on my knees before she could speak or crawl?'

Ronaine, then, was not a traitor after all, but what was this about Mark & Simple, his father's former employers, and a dead girl? He waited till silence told him that Ronaine's friend was gone, while a heavy tread, backwards and forwards, let him know that Ronaine himself was still there. Then he knocked at the door again.

‘Phil,’ exclaimed the doctor, ‘faith, I forgot ye!’

‘Why did you lock me up there? And who is that dead girl? I have cause to know.’

‘And indeed ye have cause, my poor boy. For she was to have been your wife, if she’d lived, and her fortune would have been yours. ’Tis Zenobia, my own poor little girl, that I’ve been saving up for all these years, and come back from every foreign land that there is, to see. She was the best and dearest little thing, and she’d have been a noble woman, as good a wife and mother, aye, and grandmother too, as she’s been a daughter, and I’ve just heard the sad news that she’s gone. Ye’ll excuse my low spirits, Phil, I’ll not be good for much to-day. Help yourself, and never mind me.’

He helped himself, by way of example, and his eyes filled with tears for the loss of the child whom he had never tried to help or to ask after, even when in the same town with her, until he had been induced to indulge his feelings by the offer of five pounds. But to Phil, all incapable of comprehending the complicated proceedings of

more finely organised natures and the flights of imagination so easy to them, the bereaved father's sorrow seemed a little maudlin indeed, but not the less real.

'Yes, Phil,' said Ronaine with a gulp; 'I've just had the news from my lawyers that the poor little girl's no more. It's hard, after not seeing her for over a year, to come back and—— But I'm not forgetting 'tis hard lines on you too, my poor boy. Zenobia, there's a name! And she was the very jewel of my heart and the light of my eyes.'

'I needn't say I'm sorry for you, Ronaine; and you had not even seen her once since you came home?'

'Not once, Phil. I was planning a surprise, but that's neither here nor there now. I've been gathering moss by rolling, ye know, and nobody could ever write me any news, because nobody ever knew where I'd be from hour to hour. But 'tis all one now. Maybe one day I'll ask ye to come with me and see her grave.'

'Indeed, I'm sorry with all my heart,' said Phil, finding nothing unnatural in any eccentricity of Ronaine, 'but, as you say,

there are some things one can never mend, and death's not the worst of them. Why did you lock me up just now?'

'I was afraid ye might wake up with a fever, and I didn't know what might happen before I came back again. But there's no fear now. I locked the door on ye many a time in Russia, Phil.'

'I do believe, Ronaine, you're the only friend I've got, and so——'

'Well?'

'And so good-bye. I'm going to turn rolling-stone too. Ronaine, I did you a terrible injustice ten minutes ago. I thought, I'm ashamed to say, that you were going to sell the last bits of a broken man. Don't knock me down for it—I'm going to make you the only amends I can. I'm going to trust somebody once more—you. Which is the best country you know for a man without a character to start life again? You wanted to know, last night, what had happened to me, if I was weak enough to be troubled because a master had turned me off or a woman had jilted me. I'll tell you, and then help me or drop me according to what you believe. I'm likely, at any

moment, to be taken to gaol on a charge of felony.'

'The devil ye are! But what then? So am I—so is every honest man. But ye'll not stay in gaol long. There isn't a jury that wouldn't say "Not guilty" on the strength of the looks of ye. And if ye want a witness to character, call Dr. Ronaine.'

'It's a shame to worry you with my troubles when you have so great a trouble of your own.'

'Not at all, Phil. If there's one thing I like better than my own troubles, it's those of my friends.'

'If I tell you that I am guilty, what will you believe?'

'If ye did, 'twould be a hard case, anyhow. But it depends; if 'tis manslaughter, that's an accident that might happen to any man that wasn't born without hands.'

'This is theft.'

'There's my answer to that, Phil, and that's my hand. Snap your fingers at the rest of them for a pack of fools. Ye're no mean thief, whatever ye are.'

'Ronaine, the stolen jewels were found upon me, and I confessed everything. What

do you say now? I don't want you to give me your hand. I want you to help a poor devil of a thief, whose life you were once unlucky enough to save, to escape from gaol—at least, if you are ever questioned about one Philip Nelson, to say there is no such man. It will be true.'

'Oh, but this is murder, Phil!' cried Ronaine. 'Poor boy, poor boy! But 'tis not for me to blame ye; there've been days when I wouldn't have trusted myself alone with my own jewels, let alone another man's. But give up the boy that was to have been my own son-in-law? I wouldn't give ye up if ye'd robbed the Bank of England of every brass farthing. Ye've not shown yourself clever enough at the game to be a real rogue. Ye were took all of a moment with the sight of the jewels, which are the stony fruits of the devil's own tree; but why didn't ye borrow of me all my little girl's fortune before it came to making free with what——'

'Call it stealing,' said Phil; 'it's a shorter word.'

Ralph Bassett had refused to believe, on the clearest evidence, in a stranger's guilt; Ronaine, believing the worst, refused to give

up the man in whom he had been deceived. Which was the truer friend?

‘I’ll call it what I please. But oh, the pity of it—the pity of it entirely!’ cried Ronaine. ‘I’ll have to treat ye for I don’t know what; but, kill or cure, I won’t give in! Yes, I’ll have something to live for, after all. May be ’twas as well I lent Dick Esdaile that five pounds at The Mare. If I hadn’t, I’d be five pounds the poorer now. I’ll see ye through this, Phil, if ’tis only for Zenobia’s sake, that’s dead and gone. I’ll see ye through it to-morrow. No, Dick’s right for once, I’ll see ye through it to-day.’

And the strong man had to lean upon the weak man, so weak had the strong man become.

CHAPTER VI

DAPHNE

PHŒBE, crushed by the mortification of failure, still more crushed by her experience of the world behind the scenes, went back to her inn, it will be remembered, and cried over the nature of the universe at large. Her tears were not in the least for what will be called her real troubles, many as they were. Till her small stock of money ran out, she would never realise that her purse could ever be empty, and that all other troubles must sink into wholesome insignificance when the wholesome curse of bread-winning by labour comes in. For the present she even forgot to remember that she was absolutely and positively rich in the sense that everybody is rich who has provision for the day and for the evil thereof. She could dine and sleep as well and as long as she liked, and had luggage enough to put off the day of reckoning for even longer than she

could rightly afford. Nor were her tears for the self-pity commonly born of loneliness, although in truth she had made herself lonely indeed. They broke out because her last belief, that reality was only to be found where it was least to be looked for, had broken down.

Like Philip, she was at last giving in. In that frame of mind, a man refuses to obey anybody, even himself; a woman casts about for somebody to tell her to do something, anything, and does it hungrily. Perhaps it was as well that Stanislas was not at her side just then, for a girl with a pound or two in her purse would be at least a temporary fortune to a man who had nothing at all, and, after all, he had turned out to be no more a sham than everything and everybody else in the world. Esdaile had asked her to visit his studio, and, as well as she could remember, she had given him to understand that she would go. Probably—so she felt—neither the man, nor the studio, nor the promise, were particularly real. But it had been a command, and there was not any conceivable command that she was not in the mood to obey.

Just one hand seemed held out to her in a manner which she could not distrust or mistrust, if only because its owner professed nothing more than an interest in her entirely for professional purposes of his own. Probably the painter wanted a model cheaply, and did not like to miss the chance of getting hold of one for nothing at all. So far there was something satisfactorily straightforward about his proposal ; at any rate, since she was drifting, she might as well drift one way as another. As for the proprieties, she had never been sufficiently instructed in them to know that things may seem improper without being so in reality. So, for many sham reasons, and for the one real one that she had been bidden when she was hungry to obey, she set out at the appointed hour for Esdaile's house, hoping that the road might lead her somewhere farther, as far, at least, as might be, from where she was now.

Mr. Esdaile, the friend of Mr. Marcus, might be, for aught she could tell, one of those men whom a young woman must not be seen visiting if she has anything in the shape of a character to lose. Such men had not been altogether left out of her books and her

plays. But then fiction, being fiction, takes immense account of physiognomy, and, until the most recent times, always made a roué look exactly what one ought to look like, if the canons of physiognomy were really laws of nature. Nobody could look less like a roué than Esdaile, with his dry voice and manner, and the smile that perpetually hovered between a good-humoured jest and an ill-humoured sneer. Probably he was not more particular in his life than elderly bachelors are apt to be, who make more money than they want, have nobody but themselves to spend it upon, and nobody at all to hoard it for; but this train of speculation was wholly out of Phœbe's line. To her, he was chiefly like a direction post, that might point out which way to take and which to avoid, but could not possibly keep her company for a single step of the road. She was ceasing to be afraid of anything—even of Phil.

Esdaile had the whole of a rather large house to himself, and every room in it was more or less a studio or a lumber-room; but his arrangements were in a regulated disorder, and resulted in the rude comfort of a man who lives as he likes from hour to hour, and

is never set to rights, on any pretence, from one end of the year to another. The hall was itself a lumber-room, and the staircase a warehouse of artistic properties. There seemed dust enough about to ransom an emperor. But it had lain undisturbed for so long as to have settled into a not ineffective tone, giving the London house the air of an interior by some Spanish master. It suited the colouring of Phœbe's own nature too well to allow her to feel shy. If only the interior of Mr. Marcus had been like it—but it was too late to think of that now.

Inconsistently with his surroundings, Esdaile himself, neatly dressed and cleanly shaved, was engaged in dusting a picture as she was announced into the studio.

‘You are more punctual than I hoped, Miss—Miss Vernon,’ said he, giving the picture a final touch, and regarding her keenly. ‘Thank you for coming. I don’t know if you are a judge of pictures? But I forget, everybody is that. Even I am, though I paint them; so of course you, who don’t, must be a judge all the more. What do you think of this? It’s a copy of my first picture—my first, at least, that had a price worth

naming. What do you think of it? Don't be afraid of not liking it, and saying so. I like people to set up minds of their own.'

'It is very pretty indeed—at least, I suppose so,' said Phœbe, looking with sadly little intelligence at the picture of a little girl with a doll, seated on the floor, and with a great deal of life in her widely open eyes. Phœbe's education in the matter of pictures had been shamefully neglected; I fear she would have called the great Transfiguration very pretty indeed. But, in the present instance, her epithet was not ill chosen. Esdaile, in spite of the early promises of Bohemia, had not yet become even so much as a Raphael.

Esdaile shrugged his shoulders, for, though he knew himself to be no Raphael, nobody likes his work to be called very pretty indeed. Very bad would have been better; for such an opinion condemns only the critic, not the painter.

'I think you may say as much as that,' said he. 'Do you ever look in the looking-glass, Miss Vernon? When you are a good many years older, you will try to find one that will reflect away a few years. When

you want that, don't go to Wardour Street; come to me, and look at that very pretty picture. You will see what you were as a child—not, at present, so very long ago. I've been wanting to get the face of that child grown up, and now I've found it—thanks to you, and it is, on the whole, very much what I expected it to be. It has not quite fulfilled all my hopes, but that makes it all the more interesting. I'll tell you all the story presently. I'm going to make a first study of you, if you'll take off your hat, and sit down there and sit still. There, that will do. Don't think you're being “took off,” and don't be afraid of talking. Fancy yourself at home. Home! as to that, you've left your friends to go upon the stage.'

'No. I said I had no friends and no home. And I suppose there isn't even the stage now.' She did not regret having yielded to the temptation of obeying somebody. Sitting there to be talked to, she had a reprieve from thinking, and a studio was unfamiliar enough to afford her an escape from her own surroundings, if ever so little. The smell of the turpentine was new, and, since it belonged to another, must therefore

needs belong to a more wholesome sort of world than any she had known. Every mood has its scent, and the scent, whenever it returns, recalls the mood.

That sounds like nonsense, and must needs sound like it so long as the science of human nature remains in its infancy. As long as she lived, Phœbe would prefer the flavour of turpentine to that of any of the perfumes which had lied to Miss Doyle.

'No,' said Esdaile. 'There doesn't seem to be even the stage. If you had the genius of a Siddons you couldn't expect to do anything on the stage for years—of course I mean honestly; and you seem to me to be a lady. Read stage biographies, and see. What in the world made you think you could act, I don't know. If you came to me and told me you'd never handled a brush and wanted to paint, you'd find Marcus an angel to what I should be. You want to make your living, you say. What can you do?—sing?'

'I never tried,' said Phœbe sadly, and at last humbly. 'No; I don't think I could sing.'

'Can you play the piano, the harp, the drum?'

‘No.’

‘Can you cook?’

‘Hardly at all.’

‘Perhaps you can’t even teach? Though of course, if you can’t do anything yourself, being able to teach others almost follows. Still pupils can’t be got in a day.’

‘Oh no,’ said Phœbe, honestly forgetting that she was sitting for her portrait, I can’t teach anything—I don’t know anything—I’ve never learned anything at all.’

‘You know nothing—you’ve learned nothing? Then, great Heaven! novel writing is the only thing on earth left you to do.’

‘I think, perhaps, I could sew a little or serve in a shop,’ said poor Phœbe, the last remnant of her life crumbling into nothing.

‘There you go again; as if there were any use in sewing a little, or as if serving in a shop were just as easy as, say, stepping on to the stage! I’m going to tell you the story of that child whose eyes are so like yours. She was a little girl, who used to wear out a great many boots, named—she had a terrible name—nothing less than Marion Eve Psyche Zenobia Dulcibella Jane. And I learned only yesterday afternoon that she is dead. She

would have been just about your age. Yes; my fortune, such as it is, has been made by Marion Eve Psyche Zenobia Dulcibella Jane.'

He did not look at her as he spoke; but she was quick enough to know that he had not spoken without meaning. She had no recollection of the name of Esdaile in her earliest life, any more than those of Bassett, Urquhart, Ronaine, and Doyle. They had all, except the last, dropped off before she was able to remember anything so real, and the one who had never dropped off had always been invisible from the beginning. But she looked at the picture of the little girl with a new and startled interest; and there was one point in it which did act as a link between herself and the picture—she had certainly known and loved that wooden doll.

But she had not been startled into speaking. What could this stranger, who could only have guessed her by her eyes, mean by telling her that she was dead, or at least by telling her that he had heard so? Did he really think so? And what would he say or do if he learned that she was living? Would he think it his duty to communicate with those whom she refused to recognise as her friends? That,

at least, must never be. Her meeting him began now to look like some sort of destiny. Should she let herself drift, or should she struggle still? And if she should struggle, then against what, and with whom? Was Esdaile likely to prove her friend—that is to say, one who would advise her to do something she would like; or her enemy—that is to say, one who would make her do something she abhorred?

‘You have heard that this little girl is dead?’ asked she.

‘On the best authority,’ said Esdaile; ‘on that of a lawyer and a doctor. I only want a parson to be sure.’

‘I am sorry for that,’ said Phœbe. And she was sorry; for that little girl had indeed died long ago—had died with the doll, and with the boyish, knightly devotion of Phil, and with the fight for existence against the milkman and the gas company. Was it the smell of the turpentine that made those now seem such good times?

‘Why sorry? It’s my opinion, Miss Burden—Miss Vernon, that you’ve murdered her yourself, to get her eyes. Well—let her be dead, then. Turn a little more towards

the light, please, and look at me—not away. I'm not worth looking at, I know ; but you are. No, that's not a compliment, Miss Vernon. Where are you living now ? What ? At an expensive hotel—you, who say you have no money, and no friends ? Let me see. I owe that little girl a debt—a heavy debt. Her eyes made me, and as she's dead, I must pay it back to all that's left of her. I'm hanged if I know how to put it ! Can you trust me, Miss Vernon ? You needn't answer, you'll have to. I have a strong idea that Marion Eve et cetera isn't quite dead as long as you're alive. I've always found that doctors understand nothing, and that lawyers misunderstand everything. But on the honour of a sort of a gentleman, I'll ask no questions before I get the answers. You're Miss Vernon. Marion Eve et cetera is dead and gone ; as Ronaine would say, poor little thing ! And to think of what she cost in shoe leather—but that would be Greek to you. I have a housekeeper and caretaker ; a gentleman whose duty is to take care that nothing shall be done in this house without orders, which means never. I pay him so little that he has mainly to live on his wife, who lets lodgings.

You must live there. If there's no room, somebody must go out and live elsewhere. You must ; for you must live somewhere, and London is—well, never mind what London is, for a girl who can't afford an hotel, and who goes about seeking rest and finding none. If you knew your Hogarth, which of course you don't, you'd know what I mean. You don't know what I mean, and as I don't mean that you should, you must do what I say. As for work—bread-work——'

He fell into an absent fit, and ceased to follow her features with his hand. Phoebe felt that his study was over, and rose.

'I shall live,' said she.

'Ah ! you have faith. A capital thing. I haven't ; but though I live without, I can't deny that with it I should have lived just the same. Miss Vernon, you were so unexpectedly punctual this morning that I have acquired, at last, a considerable tincture of faith in you. Don't run away from your hotel, not even if they're so confiding as to let you without a settlement of your bill. I can manage to understand, mere painter though I am, that you may have reasons for not caring to tumble back into what you won't call your home.

I've had a home myself, which, being of flesh and blood, I kicked over as soon as I could run alone. Alone! there's only one creature alone on this earth, and that's every man, and every woman, and every child. Be alone, and like it; don't be afraid. Married or single, down in the deepest of you alone you'll have to stand.'

She had been on the verge of telling him her story frankly, so far as it contained anything that could be made comprehensible to anybody who had not followed her from her starting-point at the withered bay in the back garden through all her adventures, of which at least nine-tenths had happened to her nowhere but in her own mind. But his last words decided her to keep silence, and to accept the happy accident that she was supposed to be no longer living.

'I shall know how to do that,' said she, 'to live alone. I have never lived anyhow else——'

'You interest me, Miss Vernon, which means that I'm no longer in the least curious to know anything about you that you don't care to tell. Curiosity, as no doubt you know, ends where interest begins, because curiosity

concerns the past, interest the future. Whether you are a living or a dead woman is no concern of mine, but even ghosts require bread in these substantial times, and butter besides. You won't leave your hotel till you have heard from me again; if you do, I will have no compunction. I will dig up your grave.'

He held out his hand by way of dismissal, and she left him, wondering over many things, but over none that gave any real cause for wonder. Three things seemed certain enough, that Esdaile could have no positive interest in communicating with Phil; that if he did, she would not consider his interference unpardonable; and that, meanwhile, what he had said was undeniable, that even ghosts must live nowadays. If only she could be forced into Phil's power, and if only he would care any longer to use it, so that she might justify her submission to herself as that of a martyr to inseparable destiny! How gladly at heart she would have felt his hand upon her shoulder as she wandered back alone through the streets, she utterly refused to own.

'If I am to starve, I will be free,' she cried

openly ; ‘ and oh, if I could only be a slave ! ’ she whispered deeply.

If only she could have carried her real self upon the boards, the fortune of Mr. Marcus would be made fifty times.

If she had met Phil, she would have turned and fled ; she would have fled with all honest swiftness, like Daphne from Apollo ; but if he had failed to overtake her, she would have despaired, hailing freedom and hating it at the same time in her heart, as often happens with those who shout the loudest for liberty. She could not persuade herself to repent of having rejected him when he had first asked her to marry him, because he had sued. If he sued, she would reject him now. But if he commanded her—— There her thoughts made a stubborn stand. They refused to desert their outpost ; but they knew all the while that the heart of the citadel had been betrayed.

She did not come face to face with Phil, which was strange, considering that it would have been a singular coincidence and was therefore practically safe to happen. But before she was half way to her hotel, she came suddenly face to face with one whom, next to Doyle, she would have given all she was worth

not to see. It was Mrs. Hassock, and there was no means of escape unless she amazed the street by taking to her heels.

‘Oh, Miss Doyle!’ said the ex-duenna, with something more than her characteristic dignity, ‘I dare say you’ll be kind enough to inform me what this conduct means?’

‘Indeed I will not,’ said Phœbe. ‘There is no reason for you to know why I have left home. I am answerable to nobody in the world for whatever I do or wherever I go.’

It was the best thing she could think of to say while considering how to escape from the female accomplice of the trader in white slaves. Instinctively she looked round for aid, while, as usual, her courage, so great when not wanted, oozed out of her heart and left it dry.

‘We’ll have to see about that, Miss Doyle. It’s my honest belief you’re nothing but common swindlers, the lot of you. The papers are just choke full of widows and orphans; and if I don’t get my reticule back and pretty sharp, with nothing missing out of it, I’ll have that in the papers too. I’m a widow myself, and I mean to get my rights and my reticule if there’s law.’

‘Your rights—your reticule?’ asked Phœbe, dimly conscious of the concoction of some pretence for getting her back into the clutches of her purchasers and owners.

‘Yes, Miss Doyle. When there’s a break-up, and when the very night before a young lady makes off with any property she can lay her hands on, down to the servants’ reticules, and then sets up she doesn’t know what they mean, then, if she don’t know, I do.’

‘I am not going with you—I don’t know what you mean,’ said Phœbe, wondering whether Mrs. Hassock might not be armed with some such powers, conferred by the Sultan, as Sir Charles Bassett had held from the Czar.

‘But I’m going with you, young lady, whether you like it or no. I’m going to have your boxes searched this time.’

Phœbe walked on quickly. She was young and light, while her owner’s agent was heavy and slow. But before she had gone many steps Mrs. Hassock, panting, seized her by the arm.

‘Here—hi! policeman,’ she exclaimed.

Phœbe’s heart sank low indeed, for there stood a tall constable gazing down upon her with an awful stolidity.

‘What is it, ladies?’ asked he.

‘Policeman,’ said Mrs. Hassock, ‘this young lady’s one of the bank people in the papers—my mistress she was—and she went off with my reticule in a railway-train, and she makes believe she doesn’t know. And that’s the truth, as true as I stand here.’

The constable looked from the well-dressed and good-looking young woman to the stout and excited housekeeper, and drew his own conclusions.

‘Do you want to give this lady in charge for larceny?’ asked he. ‘Charge your mistress with stealing a servant’s bag? Come, my good lady, that won’t do. We can’t have ladies annoyed in the streets. You’d better go to the police-court and get a summons——’

‘Policeman,’ said Phœbe, finding an unexpected friend, ‘pray be kind enough to call me a cab. I don’t even know what she means.’

The situation was obvious : a lady annoyed by a discharged servant whose conduct was evidence that the discharge was well-earned. The policeman was not clever enough to argue that the obvious aspect of a situation must needs be the wrong one. Mrs. Hassock lost

her temper, so that her remonstrances, with the usual fate of angry honesty, fell upon air. He, giving himself credit for infinite tact and *savoir-faire* in dealing between a woman and a lady, called the cab, took the number, and heard the address—which was a wrong one. For Phœbe, though innocent of theft, had her wits quickened by the natural desire of a free-born Englishwoman to escape from Oriental slavery.

He nodded in a friendly manner to Mrs. Hassock and moved on.

‘But I’ll have that bag back yet,’ said she, smarting under injustice and official stupidity. ‘I’ll have my rights out of that runaway old thief and his fine young lady yet, if I’ve got to follow them round and round the world.’

Phœbe had received one lesson ; whether she could afford to stay or not, she must leave her hotel without delay, since John Doyle and Mrs. Hassock were at her heels. Mrs. Hassock, having made sure that the address given to the cabman was, as she expected, a blind, and having lost her faith in the police, thought of the only man likely to know anything of the vanished Doyles, and spent twelve times the value of her bag in a journey to Cautleigh

Hall. Devotion to principle, whether it be a disguise for avarice or for vengeance or for wounded vanity, is fond of fishing for sprats with herrings.

CHAPTER VII

RALPH BASSETT'S WISH

SIR CHARLES BASSETT, fearful of making a false step in the dark, lest it should be straight into a pitfall prepared for him by his incomprehensible enemies, proved himself, in little things, to be really the admirable diplomatist that he had once fancied himself in great things. Understanding nothing, he took care that nobody else should understand anything at all of what had been going on under the public eye.

‘My dear Mrs. Urquhart,’ he had said, when the lady, indignant at the escape of the self-accused robber, demanded a hue and cry, ‘I am rather glad, on the whole, that my boy behaved so much like—a boy. You have recovered your property, and Miss Doyle has recovered hers, without much trouble and with none of the public fuss and exposure which of course you, as a refined and kindly

lady, would dislike extremely. Perhaps we are, as your husband seems inclined to hold, compounding a felony ; but I'm afraid Ralph has done worse, by aiding the escape of a criminal. As things are, nobody knows the rights of the matter but ourselves. If you will let matters rest, you will be conferring a personal favour upon us all—upon me.'

'But the principle of the thing, Sir Charles ! It isn't of myself, I assure you, that I'm thinking, but of the hundreds of poor unprotected ladies who can't stand guarding their jewel-cases with loaded pistols all day long. To let this man go is to let him loose upon society ; it is a duty we owe to our fellow-creatures to have him caught and sent to goal. I would go through a great deal of disagreeable trouble for the sake of principle, Sir Charles. Mr. Urquhart will tell you what I'm capable of in that way. Have you ever known me give up a principle, Alexander, since I married you——'

'Never,' answered her husband with sad solemnity.

'Then,' said Sir Charles, ' the favour will be all the greater. Your husband shall not be more grateful to you for your first breach of

principle than I shall be for your second. I admire principle so much myself that you may be sure I shall sympathise with you most cordially. Poor young fellow ! And he looked and seemed so much like a gentleman. It is very strange.'

'There I must differ from you, Sir Charles. To my eyes—and they are pretty sharp ones—a more villainous face and a more offensive manner I never saw. I said to Mr. Urquhart that very night, as we were going to bed, "That Mr. Nelson has the face of a criminal." Didn't I, Alexander ?'

'No doubt, since you say so,' said Alexander. 'It is a safe principle in metaphysics that memory, being positive by nature, is more trustworthy than forgetfulness, which is by nature negative. If A remembers a thing, and B forgets, the thing in question will have happened, you may be sure.'

'As if one wanted metaphysics to see the nose on one's face !' said she with some scorn. 'Well, since you ask me, Sir Charles, and for the sake of your family, I will consent to waive principle this time. But that man will come to the gallows yet—mark my words. Don't let anybody, when that comes to pass, say I never told you so.'

‘I thank you with all my heart,’ said Sir Charles, making her the slight bow, with the dash of gallantry in it, that he knew pleased her.

That matter settled, he was free to consider the case of Miss Doyle.

Naturally, he did not believe in the telegram which had carried her off too suddenly to permit of her seeing her host to bid him good-bye, or even to leave him a message of explanation. Phil had never meant that he should, or cared for anybody’s belief or otherwise, so long as Phœbe could be got out of Cautleigh Hall on any pretext, in time to leave danger behind her.

Sir Charles, having made enquiries, easily gathered, in spite of the confused condition of the household at the return of Stanislas under arrest, that no telegram had come to the Hall, for anybody, at the given time. Every servant assumed that it must have been taken in by another, and Sir Charles, taking care to leave each under that impression, questioned them one by one until none was left to question. The story of the telegram he traced to Mrs. Hassock, and she was as likely to be merely the repeater as she was to be the inventor of a lie. So it seemed that Miss

Doyle, with scarcely a colourable pretext, had taken precipitate flight at the very moment when her accomplice was brought back a prisoner. She had not even stayed on the chance of recovering her lost valuables. Had she really lost them, and had Stanislas taken them, she surely would have stayed. Yet why should she take to flight when, as was obvious now, she had not given those things to Stanislas, and so had nothing to fear in the way of overt proof of her connection with him? She had really been robbed, and by the least likely of strangers, and yet she had run off in the style of a detected criminal.

With the other guests he accepted the story of the telegram, and even supplied the little touches that were needed to take off the edge of the strangeness of Miss Doyle's sudden departure. Nor did he make any difference towards Ralph, for he had his reasons for keeping from his son's mind every vaguest suspicion that there might ere long be a battle for the possession of Cautleigh Hall. He did not mean to lose, and if his son were taken into confidence before the enemy's case was brought face to face with a stronger, Ralph might not impossibly turn out

to be the worst enemy of all. And besides, if legal right and moral wrong had, as seemed likely enough, to be met with weapons for which law has a bad name, Sir Charles, ready enough to use them with his own hands, for his son's sake, recoiled from the idea of letting Ralph guess what sort of weapons his father might be driven to use. Many a robber desires to bring up his son in honest ignorance of the crimes to which his fortune is to be owed.

What might be the particular enquiries which had brought Miss Doyle and her fellow-conspirator to Cautleigh Hall, he had never been able to decipher by means of any satisfactory theory. Still, as from the beginning, it was the seemingly barren purposelessness of her proceedings that not only baffled but alarmed him. Some purpose there must be, to require all this machinery of disguises and clandestine communications, more than that of merely discovering how the land lay. It must be to collect evidence of right; perhaps to invent and deposit evidence with an insane view of making a weak right into a strong one. Could Cautleigh Hall contain, and be known by the rightful heir

to contain, any documentary evidence of identity or title that required careful and secret searching, such as might be carried on by an unsuspected lady guest and the confidential valet of the young master? Surely there could be nothing of the kind. But—the thought came into his head like an inspiration—something else there might indeed be, something of such overwhelming importance as to make the otherwise rightful heir's entire right hang upon its discovery and destruction. What was more likely than that some prudent Bassett should have made a will, in order to exclude the disgraceful Rayner, by which Cautleigh would come to the younger branch represented by Sir Charles, by a better title than that of Rayner's accidental heirdom-at-law? Testators have done infinitely odder things than make wills and then hide them where they are least likely to be found. So common a form of eccentricity would be sensible compared with that of leaving a loophole for the admission of such a man as Rayner Bassett was known to have been—sot, profligate, forger—everything that a Lincolnshire baronet ought not to be.

Sir Charles, be it remembered, had been a literary and dramatic dabbler in his time, so that the idea presented itself to him in a less strange shape than if he had been born in the county magistracy. He had cultivated an orthodox contempt for sentimental emotion and romantic incident, but the leopard was, at heart, the spotted leopard still. He had come a complete stranger to Cautleigh Hall; he had never known the place till he came there as master. Its family mysteries were Greek to him, while to Rayner Bassett not a hole of the place or a tradition of the family could be unknown. Who so likely as Rayner Bassett, alias Jack Doyle, to know of a will that cut him off hopelessly from his own? And if that will were nowhere else to be found, a very simple process of logic would lead the scent straight to Cautleigh Hall.

‘There’s one strong point about that theory,’ thought Sir Charles; ‘that it accounts for everything—the young lady to pry above stairs; the lacquey to grope below. Their attempted flight together, her actual flight, as soon as the paper—if there be one—was found. As to the jewel business, that must be a coincidence—a queer one, doubtless,

and a bewildering one to a man without a clear brain and his wits well about him, but still only a coincidence, and nothing more. It must have put the other side out, even more than it has me. But if I am not leaping in the dark, if we hold under a will, and that will be indeed in the hands of an unscrupulous scoundrel who has already shown himself capable of forgery. I wonder what they paid that poor scamp of a Pole for his part of the ferreting? Not so much, I fancy, that I can't buy out of him what his part may have been. If there was a will, it is now destroyed. If it has been destroyed, it was because it excluded Rayner Bassett, and supported my title to everything that a will can carry. If so, justice requires that will to be restored. They could not deny the authenticity of the restored will without admitting their possession and destruction of an old one to the same purpose, and that, I imagine, a man like Rayner Bassett would hardly dare to do in the face of a man like me. It would be fine to see the effect of the flourish of a will in their faces that they thought they had destroyed. Forgery, Urquhart would call it. Well, it mayn't have to be done, after all.

But it may. No lawyer's quibble shall transfer Cautleigh Hall from Ralph Bassett to a scoundrel—a forger. And if dirty work must be done, for justice sake, Ralph's fingers, at least, shall not be stained.' He rang the bell. 'Send Stanislas to me,' said he.

Stanislas, restored to innocence, and free, thanks to Phil Nelson, from all suspicion of dishonesty, was entitled to pose as a martyr who might even demand compensation for his sufferings. He came at once to Sir Charles, and stood before his master's father with what looked like an air of sullen injury, tempered with large-minded melancholy, which only refrains from forgiving because it is too modest to intrude upon the privilege of higher powers.

Sir Charles Bassett was really a better diplomatist than he now believed. He knew when to go straight to the point, and how.

'Monsieur Adrianski,' said he, 'how much has Mr. Doyle promised to give you when he becomes master of Cautleigh Hall?'

Stanislas opened his eyes. But the simple rascal did not venture to contradict, before knowing to what the question might lead. So he closed his eyes again, and allowed

himself to look a little indignant and a little confused. The British diplomat felt that he read this poor foreign knave through and through.

‘Come,’ said he, ‘your game is up. You may as well have it all out, and have done. I’m not going to be hard on a man who has been merely hired to do a certain work, and has, no doubt, done it well. I dare say you fancy that your secret meetings with Miss Doyle were unseen, and that you, the spy, have not turned out to be the spied. Who has that paper you were employed to search for—you or Miss Doyle? If I’m wrong,’ thought he, ‘I shall soon see that everything I’m saying is Greek and Hebrew to the man. If I’m right, he’s not the sort to stick at selling Uncle Rayner for anything on earth, paid down.’

His logic was admirable. But, being a gentleman in his way, he forgot one thing—that a certain sort of knave will manage to sell something, even when he has nothing to sell—if only the purchaser. It was all Greek and Hebrew to the Polish nobleman, indeed. But if he owned it, he felt that it was he who would be sold.

‘The paper?’ asked he.

‘Yes. You mayn’t know what it is—I dare say you don’t—but the paper that is now either in Miss Doyle’s hand or in yours. In whose is all I need to know.’

‘It is clear, Sir Charles, you know much. And if I shall know how much——’

‘You’re a cool hand, Mr. Adrianski, upon my word. Take it that I know how you came into my son’s service; why you came here; the nature of your service to be rendered to Miss Doyle. Come, you needn’t be afraid. If you give me that paper now, then, on the word of a gentleman—do you know what that means?’

‘Who else shall know but me? I am a gentleman in my own country, Sir Charles.’

‘Well, it’s something to be a gentleman somewhere. I won’t drive a bargain; I won’t hide from you that the paper is of more value to me than the sum I offer you. The minute that paper is in my hands you shall receive—let me see—a hundred pounds. Yes; a hundred pounds.’

The bargain may seem crude, and by no means likely to obtain its end. But Sir Charles knew what he was about, very well.

‘One hundred pound,’ mused Stanislas. Clearly some paper had been stolen, and Phœbe must have been the thief, since the question lay between him and her. Why should he refuse the possible profit of a hundred pounds? Why, by denying his knowledge, should he deprive himself of the chance of earning a paltry ten? Of course he would never be able to recover the missing paper. But—— ‘Yes, Sir Charles,’ said he; ‘I have it not, or I would give it now. But that Phœbe——’

‘Phœbe, you coxcomb! Is that how you speak of a lady?’ asked Sir Charles, whom the success of his examination was putting almost into a good humour. ‘Ah, I see I was not wrong in spotting you two for something more than you seemed.’

‘The penetration of monsieur,’ said Stanislas, ‘is sublime. I see it is not useful to hide things from him. She is charming. We are good friends, Sir Charles, for all I am but a valet, and she a my lady, a true demoiselle. But I have to go to London; I know not where. Will it be too much to ask an advance of twenty pounds—and the wages I lose?’

‘You shall have your wages, of course, and twenty pounds in gold,’ said Sir Charles.

Stanislas had expected to be beaten down to ten, perhaps five, and must have sorely repented that he had not asked for fifty. Still, twenty pounds was not a bad profit for a discharged valet to make by merely pretending to know as much as he was supposed to know.

‘I shall never see that paper,’ thought Sir Charles. ‘He’ll tell Doyle, and Doyle will give him twice the money and promise him ten times. I shall never see Mr. Adrianski again. But it was worth twenty times twenty pounds to learn that my guess about the will was not wrong. I should have distanced the field in cross-examination if I’d ever put on my wig and gown. That will will be destroyed, and I shall be in a position to trace it to their hands, if they dare to assert that anything I choose to produce is unreal.’

It must not be supposed for a moment that Sir Charles Bassett dreamed of emulating Uncle Rayner by committing a crime. It is of the essence of crime to be wrong. Sir Charles could not feel that keeping Cautleigh Hall and the honour of an ancient house from

the hands of the traditional Rayner Bassett could possibly be wrong.

Not on this day, but after Stanislas had again, after his manner, vanished from the scene, Mrs. Hassock in her indignant impulse and natural desire to recover her own—for a black bag is an estate, no less than Cautleigh Hall—arrived at the house where she had lived for so many weeks as Miss Doyle's maid. Had she known how welcome she would be to the owner as another subject for cross-examination, she would have gone to work more boldly. As things were, the expenses of her journey had cooled her impulse, and she felt that her intention of cross-examining a baronet about the proceedings of his friends might prove a little more awkward than distance had allowed it to appear. However, she easily cut short the surprise of an acquaintance in livery who let her in, and avoided the questionings of the servants' hall by taking up her position as a visitor on important business in the library, for she was now a lady at large, and chose to be treated accordingly. Taking up a comfortable position in the alcove into which one steps through the glass doors

of the bow window, she sat down on a particularly comfortable bench to wait patiently for her interview—so patiently that she presently went off to sleep, and so lost every word of a conversation that would have been exceedingly interesting to her, as bearing upon the present whereabouts of the Doyles. ‘So you’ve turned off that foreign fellow of yours,’ said Lawrence, entering the library with Ralph. ‘Why, when he turned out not guilty, after all?’

‘My dear fellow, some people’s innocence is less satisfactory than other people’s guilt. Chaff as much as you like, but it’s all of a piece with my letting a proved thief go.’

‘Chaff upon Don Quixote was always thrown away.’

‘And what’s the news from town?’

‘Nothing. For excitement one must come to Lincolnshire. But I have just one bit of news, by the way. Do you remember a girl that was staying here lately—the archdeacon’s daughter, you know? Well, I always thought that girl was as queer as her father. She’s gone on the stage.’

‘Phœbe Doyle gone on the stage?’

‘Yes; and it’s my belief she’s been there before. People don’t act like that who haven’t been on the boards before. A painter I know a little of—Esdaile, you know—is painting her portrait. I was in his studio the other day and saw it on an easel. He said it was an actress—a Miss Vernon—not known to London fame, but no doubt the provinces knew her well. I didn’t say she had an alias in private life, because I never tell tales out of school, except to you. I only asked if Vernon was a real name or a stage name, and Esdaile didn’t know. Somehow the talk turned off just then; but if I’m not on the heels of the great Doyle mystery, I’m no better than a detective from Scotland Yard.’

‘Well, much good may the great Doyle mystery do you; she’s none the worse for being an actress, I suppose?’

‘No, I suppose not much. But it makes her easier to know. So she’s all the better, in that way. By Jove, Bassett, I believe there isn’t a stone the archdeacon wouldn’t skin, if it weren’t his own flesh and blood

—which it is—to turn a penny. If he makes his daughter nothing worse than an actress, he's a better fellow than I take him for.'

'And by Jove, Lawrence, one would think you were hit to hear the way you go on about those Doyles. The girl's a nice girl, and Vernon sounds as well as Doyle, any day. My father isn't the fellow to drop old acquaintance as long as he knows nothing bad about them, and it's quite clear your suspicions of his wanting to sponge were absurd. I don't suppose we're likely to see much of the family again.'

'I shall, though. Wherever Miss Vernon comes out I shall have the entrée of that theatre, you may be sure. And I flatter myself that I know the way to the heart of an actress pretty well. I object to the arch-deacon as a man, but as a father-in-law not at all. I must marry money, Bassett, and settle down.'

'You are a——'

'Poor devil, Bassett; and you're a rich one. I should like to know what ten thousand a year means.'

'And upon my soul, Lawrence, I should

like for once to know what it means to have nothing a year. I want to know what it feels like to be tempted to marry for money, like you, or to steal, like that poor devil of an engineer. One ought to know how other people feel, if one doesn't mean to go through life like an Urquhart, who only thinks he knows, and thinks wrong.'

'What infernal twaddle! You say you'd like to try it, because you're quite certain you'll never have to try, because you're doomed to be a rich man, whether you like it or no.'

'A gentleman to see Sir Charles Bassett, sir,' said a footman, just then entering. 'Shall I show him in here?'

'I suppose so. Who is he? My father won't be back this hour.'

'I said so, sir; but he said you'd do as well. His card's in this envelope, he asked me to say.'

'He sends in his card in a closed envelope? Well, no doubt he has his reasons. But what the——'

Ralph always believed his own eyes, and they read upon the card these words: 'Sir Rayner Bassett, Bart., Cautleigh Hall.'

CHAPTER VIII

SIR RAYNER AND SIR CHARLES

‘Now, what in the name of impudence does this mean?’ asked Ralph, tossing his friend the card. ‘Are you getting up a farce, and is this a bit of the business that you’re rehearsing upon me? What sort of a man was it who sent in this thing? He was a gentleman, you say?’

‘He might be, sir,’ said the footman. ‘He called himself one.’

‘Probably a part of his delusion,’ said Lawrence. ‘I suppose a man who fancies himself a baronet, when he isn’t, has to fancy a good many things besides. You’ll see the poor devil, I suppose. It might be fun.’

‘Yes, I’d better see him,’ said Ralph. ‘If he’s dangerous, we had better dispose of him before my father comes home. Yes, bring him in. It’s odd, Lawrence, but there

was really a Rayner Bassett in our family; so there seems to be some sort of a method in the madness, if Sir Rayner Bassett of Cautleigh Hall turns out to be a madman.'

'I was right, you see, about Lincolnshire being the land of adventure, and not town. But here he comes.'

And so, at last, just when Charles Bassett happened to be out of the way, there entered into the house of his fathers that terrible Uncle Rayner, whom all but his nephew believed to have died among the dogs ages ago.

Sir Charles had derived his ideas of Uncle Rayner from two excellent sources—from family tradition and from his personal knowledge of the man who called himself Jack Doyle. The masterful profligate, the desperate criminal, the dangerous and unscrupulous ruffian had taken an invisible shape appropriate to his character. But it was no burly giant who followed his card into the library. On the contrary, Ralph found himself confronted by a shabby, shuffling old fellow, with vacuous weakness written in every line of his face and in the form of every feature.

‘No danger there,’ thought Lawrence; ‘that man comes from the ward for idiots and imbeciles.’

The self-created baronet smiled a broad and beaming smile, and held out two flabby hands.

‘My dear boy!’ he gushed in a thin and excited treble, ‘I’m your long-lost great-uncle Rayner! Don’t you know me, now?’

‘Indeed?’ asked Ralph, more provoked than amused by what might turn out a troublesome if harmless case of monomania. He was free from the spice of malice which led Lawrence to find humour where there was really none. ‘What’s the best way to deal with a harmless madman?’ thought he. ‘Humour him, I suppose, till the keepers follow him. . . . I’m very glad you’re found again, I’m sure. Where have you been staying all this while?’

‘Oh, in London. The fact is, I didn’t know till only the other day that so many deaths in the family, and such an amazingly low proportion of the birth-rate, had caused the title and the estates to fall to me. It was always an unlikely thing, and it has

taken me a little by surprise. Of course I lost no time—as a matter of business, and for the sake of my boys, your cousins, you know. I didn't write, because I thought I'd give you and your father, my long-lost nephew, a pleasant start, to find old Uncle Rayner still in the land of the living. Yes, great-nephew, here I am. How little changed the dear old place is, to be sure. I haven't seen it since I was a boy—I never hoped to see it again. And so you're your father's son! And a regular Bassett you are; I should have known you for my great-nephew anywhere. Eh—who's that gentleman there?'

'The family likeness between you and your nephew is indeed amazing, sir, as you say,' said Lawrence gravely. 'I said to myself "That must be some collateral ancestor," as soon as you came in.'

'You are pleased to flatter us,' said the stranger. 'It is clear that you have a large bump of penetration. Alas, sir! it takes a very large bump indeed to see the likeness between my nephew and me. I am not so young as I was at his age—not at all.'

He gazed up at the ceiling with eyes that meant nothing. But Ralph, though claiming no exceptional gift of penetration, had already shown that he knew how to distinguish honesty from dishonesty in the teeth of contrary evidence, and the same feminine instinct enabled him now to perceive that his visitor was no mere imbecile with a monomania. Lawrence's attempt at chaff had been parried with dexterous simplicity.

Assuredly the intruder did not look like a Bassett, in any degree. He was dressed badly to the point of absurdity; but the cleverest tailor could not have made him look other than he was—a weak old creature, run utterly to seed.

‘And I have had my ups and downs,’ said he, ‘particularly my downs. With a large family of hungry boys, it is important to be able to lay my hands on I don't know how many thousands a year. I've been a red-hot Republican in my time, and had some idea, once, of bringing every baronet in England to the guillotine. But we get wiser as we get older, and [as we find that our efforts for the democracy are only met with the basest ingratitude. I would have the guillotine

begin with milkmen, now. But public affairs must keep—they know how. I am anxious to see my nephew, who has, no doubt, given me up for dead long ago. He will remember me—though he didn't know me for his uncle in the old days. I was a dashing young fellow then. Heigho !'

'I think, Lawrence,' said Ralph, 'that you had better let us two interview one another privately, if you don't mind.'

'By all means. No doubt you must have lots to say to one another, after such a life-long parting. I'll take a turn across the park, and see if any more adventures grow on your blackberry-bushes. By Jove! I wish my long-lost uncle would turn up; he's a long time coming. Is this another family mystery turning up?' thought he. 'Have they been shutting up the rightful heir in a mad-house, and is this the man? If that's it—then, by Jove!'

'So you say you are my father's uncle?' asked Ralph, 'and you come here in this extraordinary manner to take possession of Cautleigh Hall? You must really excuse me if I don't understand.'

'Eh? Of course I am. Did you never

hear of your great-uncle Rayner, my dear boy? Don't you know there was my poor brother, Sir Clement, whose sons were Mordaunt and a parson, and after my poor brother Sir Clement, came my poor brother, your grandfather. But between my two poor brothers there came me. On my honour, as a gentleman, my dear nephew, it never came into my brains that the elder branch had died out in such an extraordinary and simply intestate way. There had been disagreeables between me and my relations, you know; such things will happen when people are brothers, and certain circumstances, over which I had absolutely no control whatever, obliged me to change my name. I have been living in retirement, in my humble but honest way, when a providential chain of circumstances revealed to me that, ever since the death of my nephew the parson, I have been Sir Rayner Bassett of Cautleigh Hall. My dear young nephew, I assure you that the news cannot amaze you more than it amazed me—I assure you—it makes me feel—— I was born in Cautleigh Hall, you know, which you, nor your poor father, never were; and I never thought to set living eyes on it again. I used to sleep in the little room in the corner,

with the turret window. I could find my way blindfold. Ah, my dear nephew, you don't know yet what it is to be an old fellow—anyway, not as young as you used to be—who's almost forgotten what it means to be a gentleman. You've never been driven to marry a washerwoman, and to be eaten out of house and home by half-a-dozen hungry sons. Would you like to take anything? Pray make yourself at home.'

'You are very kind,' said Ralph lightly, but nevertheless realising that, if this were a case neither of imposture nor of monomania, his rash wish to learn the secret temptations of poverty were in the straightest way of being fulfilled. Of course, he knew that his father himself had succeeded to the estates and title in the most unexpected manner, but had known nothing of the doubts by which Sir Charles had always more or less been troubled. Was the man an impostor, who had somehow become possessed of the family knowledge possessed by a real Uncle Rayner? He certainly looked a queer kind of a Bassett; but then, no conscious impostor would have told, in such a simple manner, so vague a tale. He would have gone to work in a less melodra-

matic manner than he had adopted, and would have made much less sure of a hearty welcome. There was something that, at any rate, appeared to be touchingly genuine about his simple certainty of a joyful reception at the hands of relatives to whom his forgotten existence meant the loss of everything that is considered to be worth having. Or was Lawrence right, and was this very queer Bassett a monomaniac suffering from a not uncommon kind of delusion? Against this, also, appearances contended. The man's story, though vague, was obviously neither vague nor broken to the man's own mind. Could he be a real Uncle Rayner, and could his story be not only vague, but true?

‘I want to be kind,’ said the impostor, madman, uncle, whichever he might be. ‘The family hasn’t treated me well; but I’m the family now, so I can afford to let bygones be bygones. And, after all, it wasn’t you that was to blame in the old affair, seeing that you were but an unborn first cousin once removed to my poor nephew Mordaunt; things might have been different if they hadn’t been as they were. I mean everybody to be good friends all round.’

Meanwhile Sir Charles, little thinking of the new surprise that lay in store for him, rode slowly homewards from an aimless drive, endeavouring, as usual, to look over the edges of his enemies' cards. He had contrived a theory that would account for everything, in the most perfect manner, when he invented, and Stanislas Adrianski confirmed, the existence, theft, and probable destruction of a will. But then, this would mean defeat, unless the destroyed will could be restored; and the more he thought matters over, the stronger grew up the crop of difficulties in the way. Nor did he find the workings of his own mind in the least easier to follow because he obstinately refused to own that to write a will that ought to have been written by a dead man could possibly, under the extreme and exceptional circumstances of the case, deserve a bad name. This, though it really covered the whole difficulty, did not seem so difficult as the choice of a testator, the terms in which the will should be drawn, and the preparation of a story to account for its temporary loss, in case a story should be required. That the man calling himself Doyle would be perfectly aware of the fraud mattered little; two could

play at the game of capping frauds, and only one could win. Why had he not spent all these years in searching Cautleigh Hall, inch by inch, in order to find a will that had never been found elsewhere? He might have saved himself from half a lifetime of suspense, and, now, from the discomfort of having to commit, for the sake of right and justice, what the law, in its sweeping and indiscriminate way, refuses to call anything but a crime.

It was with a view of meeting his host, and of giving him what might prove to be a very needful warning, that Lawrence had set out towards the lodge, and his friendly interest in the reigning branch of the family was rewarded by the time he reached the middle of the long drive.

‘I’ve left my friend Ralph in queer company,’ said he. ‘There’s an escaped lunatic with him who says he’s his long-lost great-uncle, just come from the moon. I thought you’d better know, because——’

His ‘because’ was broken by a look on the face of Sir Charles that unmistakably showed him how right he had been to carry the news, if only by way of warning.

Sir Charles Bassett was not the less startled

because for more than twenty years he had been dreading—for months past dreading—some such blow, but rather the more.

A letter from the claimant's lawyer, even from the claimant himself, would not have startled him into anything but action. But this sudden visit was the last thing he had looked for, although it confirmed his worst fears. Terribly right he had been in guessing that Phœbe's sudden flight would be followed by the catastrophe; but he had never guessed that it would be so soon. Terribly well had Doyle and his daughter played their cards. They had not given him time to turn round. It looked as if they, having a personal knowledge of such things, had foreseen the possibility of being met with a, say restored, will, against which forgers and will-burners could not venture to contend. There was no time for a counter-stroke of forgery now. Why had he not wrung that girl's neck, instead of merely trying to read her hand and overlook her cards? Why had he not gone to work boldly in trying to make up a match between the rightful heiress and the wrongful heir? Better a hundred times that Ralph should be the son-in-law of an Uncle Rayner

and the husband of a girl who was obviously no better than she should be, than that he should lose Cautleigh Hall.

But he had too long been in the habit of covering a faint heart with a brave face to make the recovery of his countenance a hard matter. 'A madman?' asked he. 'And calling himself Rayner Bassett?'

Lawrence had said nothing about the madman's having given himself any name. But he took care to notice Sir Charles's slip into a betrayal of particular knowledge of what a madman would be likely to do.

'Calling himself Sir Rayner Bassett of Cautleigh Hall.'

'Thank you, Mr. Lawrence, for letting me know. He is no doubt a lunatic, as you say; but lunatics can make themselves almost as troublesome as if they were sane. He has seen Ralph, then?'

'They were together when I left them.'

Sir Charles swore—under his breath, but not quite so much below as to be unheard. Of all people on earth Ralph was the last whom he would wish Uncle Rayner to see. Had this also been planned? And he was beginning to feel conscious that his behaviour under

Lawrence's eyes had not merely been that of a man who disliked a half-hour's trouble with a madman before the keepers arrived. But, like a man of sense, he was not long in making up his mind that to tell Lawrence a little more than the latter was likely to guess would be the best way of stopping his guessing before it went too far.

‘I'll tell you at once what makes me uncomfortable about what you've told me,’ said he. ‘There certainly was a Rayner Bassett, an uncle of mine, who might have been Sir Rayner Bassett at this moment if he had not gone to the dogs and been devoured by them long ago. As you may suppose, I and my lawyers convinced ourselves of his death before Ralph was born. And I have no more belief in his existence now than in that of Prester John. But he has left a splendid game for an impostor to play. He left here when a young man—under a cloud. No member of the family now lives who ever saw him. The man who pumped the real Rayner—and I should say that his associates were not likely to have a grain of honesty among the lot of them—would be safe to know more about the past family history than any of us could ever

have known if it were true, or could contradict if it were not true—much less disprove. The man who knew the real Rayner best was an old farmer whose name he forged, and he died some fifteen years ago. So you see, though there's no real cause for alarm, there's likely to be trouble.'

'Can't you prove the real man's death?'

'If we could there would have been no game for an impostor to play. I hope, with all my heart, you're right, and that he's merely a madman. That won't trouble me at all.'

He had been walking his horse, ostensibly to keep pace with Lawrence, really in order to gain thinking time. But his real reason had not helped him much by the time that he reached the library door. He would have to trust to his wits as they might be spurred by the moment, after all, and recent events had considerably weakened his trust in them. One thing there was to quicken them—that he must not let Ralph guess the possibility of a question as to the strength of the position. Whatever he might have to do, Ralph must fight fair.

He looked for the burly form of Jack Doyle as he entered, and saw—the admiral!

The sight took him aback ; but things might not be so black after all, if the enemy had contented himself with sending merely an envoy and representative, and such an envoy.

‘My dear nephew !’ exclaimed the admiral, coming forward with both hands outstretched as before ; ‘I fancy you’re surprised to see me ! You little guessed that the humble copying clerk whom you used to give half-crowns to in Gray’s Inn was your own Uncle Rayner in disguise. But he was, and he knew it too, all the time. But bless my soul ! how you are changed ; you’re a regular man, and the father of a son that does you credit, I’m sure.’

‘What idiotic farce is this ?’ asked Sir Charles, able to take high ground ; ‘of course I remember you. You are Horatio Collingwood Nelson, who used to do odd jobs for Messrs. Mark and Simple, of Gray’s Inn Square. I suppose you have brought me some message from them, and have been drinking on the way.’

‘On the honour of an Associated Robespierre—of a gentleman, Sir Charles—nephew, I mean—I’m your Uncle Rayner, come, as in duty bound, as the father of a family, to ask

for what's his own. And depend upon it, I'm not going to be hard on a blood relation that's given me many a half-crown when such things were scarcer than, thank the Lord, they've been for many a day. I've been telling my great-nephew there the whole story from beginning to end, and——'

'And you must tell it to my father,' said Ralph firmly; 'whatever is right, be sure he will do.'

'Tell it then,' said Sir Charles; 'I am prepared to hear anything that my son thinks I ought to hear. There, go on.'

'Thank you, Sir Charles — Nephew Charles, I mean. Maybe I shall get to call you Charley in time, but it's difficult to begin all at the beginning, you see. You know who your Uncle Rayner was, I dare say?'

'Yes. A discreditable relation who committed forgery. Well?'

'If you please,' said the admiral with an easy wave of the hand, 'we'll let bygones be bygones about that little affair. I assure you I've forgiven and forgotten that years and years ago. I was a very ill-used man; and if you knew all the rights and the wrongs and the ins and the outs, as you will some day, you'd

agree with me, and you'll be sorry you didn't, some day. I was more sinned against than sinning; and so we'll say no more about it. I promise you I won't for one. You used to be a bit of a lawyer, like me, though in a different branch of the profession, and I'll prove my identity with your poor lost uncle without the ghost of a flaw. I was so disgusted, you see, with the behaviour of my relations, and particularly with that of a certain farmer who carried persecution to the length of a warrant, that I went to the length of changing my name.'

'And became Horatio Collingwood Nelson? A strange name for a criminal, trying to hide from justice, to choose.'

'Not all at once, sir—nephew, I mean. There was a young woman, you see—there mostly is, you know—and she was an expensive one. I don't mind telling you that I should never have needed to raise money, in what I must own was a somewhat unusual manner, if it hadn't been for her. The passion of that woman for me was something beyond the common—absolutely tragic in its intensity. Why, sir, when I wasn't able to give her any more presents, that devoted woman insisted

on giving me the presents and things that other people gave to her. Of anything more touching than such a proof of love as that I never heard—poor thing !’

‘And you took them?’ asked Sir Charles.

‘Of course I took them. I never had the heart to disappoint a woman. And her gratitude was such that when I asked her to marry me she positively jumped at the offer. Marriage was a sort of necessity, you see ; she was on the boards, and just the sort of girl to make twenty pounds a week. Stella Fitzjames, that was her name.’

‘Stella Fitzjames!’ exclaimed Sir Charles. It was the very name he had heard given to the mother of Jack Doyle’s daughter, at the Old Grey Mare.

‘And, of course, seeing that we should have to look to live on her earnings and presents and things for a time, it was necessary I should have a proper legal right to whatever she came by—those actresses are slippery customers now and then, even the best of them. But then I couldn’t—seeing that the police were out after me about that unfortunate circumstance—marry in my own name. So what did the clever creature do but get a

young fellow that was sweet upon her to buy her a marriage license in his name, and when he went off to see his papa and mamma, we became Mr. and Mrs. Doyle. You may see our handwritings in the register of Helmforth parish church any day you please.'

'I see. After robbing a foolish woman of her wages, you tricked her into a false marriage in order to keep your hold. What next, Mr. Nelson?'

So he spoke; but his words had very little reference to his thoughts—except so far as he knew that, if this were really his uncle, he was nephew to a knave so simple as not to know himself for a knave.

'I didn't tell you that story of the girl by way of a brag,' said the admiral modestly, 'but only to account for my coming to be called Nelson. You see, after the breeze blew by, Stella and I didn't get on like what we expected. I was a gentleman, you see, and she was never quite a lady. She didn't find herself able to keep me, and my unfortunate position made it impossible for me to keep her. Never marry off the boards, my dear great-nephew; you'll repent it as sure as you're alive. What came to her I don't quite rightly

know, but I took a friend's advice—always take a friend's advice, my dear great-nephew—and it was as clear as daylight that I was no more married to Stella than you are. It was fortunate, for there was a good woman ready to give me a helping hand, and she made me the best of wives while she lived, poor thing. The worst she ever did was to give me such a lot of boys, and the next worst was to die. She was but a laundress, as you know, sir, when you gave her charge of that little girl; but she was as good as gold, and she got me copying to do for Mark and Simple, whom she used to do for. And—that's all. I called myself Nelson, I don't know why, and Horatio and Collingwood seemed to come.'

If that were the story, Sir Charles had been conjuring up a false picture of the terrible Rayner Bassett indeed, in place of a natural cad who, instead of strongly sinning, had let himself drift down and down, so as to lose the last remnant of family likeness in speech, face, and bearing, until a passing wave of better fortune had made him the husband and pensioner of a decent washerwoman. The man who could weakly invent, still more the

man who could weakly relate, such a tale, could surely never have had strength enough to invent and stand by a good, strong lie. Was the real Doyle the real wire-puller, even now? But of that, a very simple test was at hand.

‘That is not all, sir,’ said Sir Charles coldly. ‘Did you ever see the Doyle in whose name you went through the form of marriage with Stella Fitzjames? No? Then I tell you that I know him, that he was present in my chambers in Gray’s Inn when that little girl was found. Nay, I know where to find him, and he will tell me whether you, or he, was the husband of Miss Fitzjames. He has a daughter, whom I believe to be that woman’s child; she was staying in this house not long ago.’

‘Bless my soul!’ cried the admiral, ‘she’s no more his child, on my word of honour, than she’s mine. Why, the girl who calls herself Miss Doyle is Marion Eve Psyche Zenobia Dulcibella Jane, the identical little girl whom the nurse-girl handed up into your chambers that night at Gray’s Inn, no less and no more.’

‘And whose death you announced to me,

in a letter signed with your name. Mr. Nelson, you are losing yourself in a labyrinth of lies. Be off with you for an impudent impostor, and never let me hear of you again.'

For the moment he breathed more freely, though the sky had scarcely shown a sign of clearing, and while all other matters remained, if the rascal's story were true, much stranger than before.

The admiral stared, and tried to look fierce, but the habits of a life, and the nature of a coward, compelled him to obey. 'I meant to be friends,' he said, 'but when you hear from my lawyers you'll sing another song. So good-day,' he added quickly, as Sir Charles rang the bell.

'Well, father?' asked Ralph, as soon as he was gone.

'Well, what is there to say?'

'This, at any rate, that I'm sorry, when you were anxious I should be a workman, I chose to be an idler. You are right, I suppose, to throw him on his strict proofs; but I learned from him something that had no place in his story to you. Philip Nelson, the engineer, is this man's eldest son.'

‘Likely enough that a thief should be the heir of a forger.’

‘Of a forger? In that case he is the heir of Sir Rayner Bassett, and Philip Nelson is no thief. There is some secret here, and——’

‘Good heaven, Ralph! What can you mean?’

‘That we must give even the devil his due, even if his due be Cautleigh Hall. What else should I mean, or you?’

And then Sir Charles Bassett knew that the worst blow had fallen, that his only son suspected the whole truth, and that he would have to fight fair, and—lose. He could not meet his son’s eyes, and, seeing this, Ralph turned his eyes away.

At last Mrs. Hassock escaped from a not unwilling imprisonment in the alcove. She had lost the beginning of the scene, but not the end.

CHAPTER IX

OLD CLOTHES

NOWHERE is about the only point in the whole universe where nobody has yet succeeded in arriving ; for we cannot be absolutely sure that no human foot has ever stood upon that spot of the earth's surface where the points of the compass cease to have a meaning. Phœbe had certainly done her best to reach a metaphorical north pole, where north, east, west, and therefore south also, exist no more. But even in this nearest approach to Nowhere that she could find, an onward path had opened itself out before her ; she could not contrive to be absolutely alone in a world where other men and women are.

The fear of again meeting her ex-duenna had hastened her departure from the dangerous quarters of her hotel, and had thus thrown her, perforce, upon the help of the painter, who, by the very simple process of being really

interested in her without any end of his own to gain—I know it is in fashion to deny such a possibility, but let it go—had won her trust, and might have won her confidence if this had been capable of being expressed in any comprehensible way. For the same instinct that made Phœbe trust Richard Esdaile, as she had never been able to trust John Doyle, also made her aware that her new patron was the last man on earth who would forbear to laugh outright at a tale of Polish counts and Turkish slave-merchants in disguise. She is not the first who, believing in nonsense, dares not expose it to ridicule lest it should be laughed away. Is it not possible to believe and yet not to believe? And yet, perhaps, the belief which dares to court ridicule is the only sort worth a straw. Phœbe was clinging to the ghosts of her beliefs with a desperate resolution which, when they had really been part of herself, they had never called for. She had to believe in something, if it were only that she might remain certain of her own reality. And if she gave up the certain knowledge that she had enemies—well, she would be driven to dream of the possibility of having friends. And that, without the least tinge of the

most innocent hypocrisy, she could not believe.

Esdaille received her the next morning in elaborate silence, and studied her a full half-hour before speaking a word that his sketch did not call for. Then he said :

‘I have settled about your rooms, and what you are to pay. The only question, I suppose, is how you are to pay anything ; and I’m not intruding on your secrets when I suggest that you’ve not been in the habit of living for nothing. Let me see—I think we agreed that there’s nothing you can do ; so the whole situation is awkward exceedingly. You’ve quite determined not to go back to your friends ?’

‘I can’t go back to what I never had,’ said Phœbe.

‘Which means you are an obstinate young woman. But don’t you see that you’ll have to starve ?’

Phœbe sighed.

‘I don’t suppose I should like to starve. But other women don’t starve——’

‘But other women do—hundreds of them ; just because hundreds of women would rather starve than do worse. I have a certain faith

in women, Miss Vernon. It's because I don't know very much about them, perhaps, old bachelor as I am ; but, after all, I don't suppose that experience of one or two is quite thrown away. Do you know that we stand in a very extraordinary relation to one another, you and I ?'

'Very likely,' said Phœbe. 'Nothing seems so very extraordinary, now.'

'So I used to think, at your age. At mine, everything is wonderful, and everything is new. That is one of the compensations of growing old, that we grow young. Here am I, a bachelor, taking into a sort of charge a stray young woman of whom I know nothing but that she is sailing under false colours, and whom I never saw till the day before yesterday. I want nothing of her but the loan of her eyes, and she wants nothing of me. I don't suppose we are ever likely to know much more of one another than we do now. Do you clearly understand that you, to put it plainly, must take my help, until you come to your senses, or starve ?'

'I can't indeed.'

'How do you propose to pay your rent, if you please ?'

‘ Mr. Marcus said——’

‘ You shall have nothing to do with Mr. Marcus, or with Mr. anybody, except Mr. Esdaile; and with him just as little as you can. There is just one thing you can do for your living, and I am the only person you can do it for. Do you know anything of painters and their ways? No? Then I will show you something about them. If you will simply come to my studio at such times as I may send for you by letter, you shall have a fee—yes, that’s the proper word—a fee of—let me see—two guineas a week whether you’re wanted or no. It is honourable work, I assure you; and just the face and figure that—you know I told you so at our first meeting—we painters can’t afford to lose. And don’t think you’ll earn your bread-and-butter lightly. You’ll have to come whenever you’re wanted, in all weathers, and sit in uncomfortable attitudes for as long as I want; and, in fact, serve a tyrant for a master, at very poor pay.’

He watched her sharply, to see whether this barefaced attempt to trick Phœbe into letting herself be grossly overpaid for doing nothing should be seen through and refused.

So far, he had no cause to fear for the success of his pious fraud ; for aught Phœbe knew, a painter's model might hold a proud position by right of office, and might command salaries equal to those of leading ladies. But he read a certain hesitation, and he read it rightly, and was pleased.

‘I have been friendly enough with you so far,’ said he, ‘because I wanted to prove to you that your coming to terms with me was the only rational thing you could do for yourself—accept the bargain, and I warn you that we shall be employer and employed, nothing more—a rigorous employer, and an absolutely independent employed. I shall be sorry for my own sake if you refuse ; but be it as you will.’

Phœbe remained silent. But ‘I must live,’ sighed she. ‘If I could only do something—anything ; it feels like I don’t know what to make my living by having a peculiar sort of eyes. . . . What would Phil say ? What would he tell me was right to do ? I should know what not to do then. . . . I don’t think he would like it ; I think he would tell me to say no—and that’s enough. Yes, Mr. Esdaile, I will,’ said she aloud. Which

meant, 'Nobody shall be my master ; I will be free.'

'Thank you, Miss Vernon.' His manner, always frosty, now became icy cold. Having gained his point, he resolved to treat her in such wise that she should complain of his rudeness and tyranny, but never of his being over kind. Her position would be safe and easy then, and scandal, if it should venture to lift its head, would be frozen before it could move its tongue.

So Phœbe's destiny, for the present, refused to lead her nowhere, and a kindly whim on the one side, a last rebellious impulse on hers, combined to place this heroine of romance in the sadly unromantic position of a painter's model. It is true that her pay belonged to regions of romance, but that she could not tell ; nor could she justify her position by such brilliant precedents as those of Rubens's wife, La Fornarina, Lady Hamilton, or the Venetian lady of Paris Bordone. Perhaps that was just as well, for some of the precedents might have had a much stronger repellent effect than the presumed displeasure of Phil. Her new lodging, not very far from Esdaile's house, was comfortable, and it struck her, knowing some-

thing of the humbler lodging-keeper class, from youthful experience of neighbours, that rents for rooms had very much fallen since she was a girl. But then neighbourhoods had naturally a good deal to do with such matters. Her change from Cautleigh Hall and Harland Terrace did not cost her a single sigh—at last she was alone and free. But it was not so agreeable to face the fact that, except when she was on duty at the studio, she had absolutely nothing to do, and was likely to be only too much alone.

Once upon a time she would have looked upon a prospect of perfect solitude, not to be broken by household duties towards a band of noisy brothers, and of endless leisure for castle-building and day-dreaming, and the perusal of all the novels that have been written from the beginning of the world, as a vision of Paradise. Paradise had come—and, having come, was Paradise no more. What were novels, now? Traitors and enemies, one and all. Even those yet more fascinating pictures of life as it is not, called plays, had proved no less misleading, and the flash of dramatic genius, for it was no less, that had for one supreme moment leaped up in her

and broken forth from her, had been frozen as utterly as Esdaile had planned to freeze calumny—in its very birth, well-nigh before it had been born. At least, so it seemed, for in truth Phœbe had all the dramatic genius that Marcus, the shopman, and Esdaile, the man of common sense, had failed to see. She could no more have acted to them, in cold blood, than she could cease to be herself—actress and audience in one. Had she been engaged by some rash manager, I know that she would, in some inspired moment, have leaped at one bound to the height of glory and have made his fortune and her own; but then she would have ruined him twice over at least before that moment came, and, having once come, it might come never again. From that last and worst of tragedies, thanks to Richard Esdaile, Phœbe Burden was spared; and I am thankful that I have had to tell another tale—nothing worse than that of one who had to find out for herself, with nobody to help her, that not one of us is strong enough to create a world; that the world is precisely what it is, and neither less nor more—that, though there are some thousand million of souls therein, there are not a thou-

sand million worlds, but one world, and that is the same to us all, with the same right, and the same wrong.

Esdaile proved both an irregular and a hard master. Phœbe never knew when to expect a summons, and, when she obeyed it, she, to all intents, might be a marble statue to him; he was never warmer than ice to her. Never again did he preach to her, or at her, or suggest that a confidence on her part would not be thrown away. She had never met a human being of this stamp before. Doyle was rough and stern, but she would not have had a woman's instinct had she thought him cold. Sir Charles Bassett was not rough, and was to Doyle what steel is to iron; but she knew well enough that had he hated a woman he would have shown his hate only in the form of doubled courtesy. Phil could outdo both in the roughness of iron and the hardness of steel, but then, in him, the furnace never went without its fire. Esdaile, when once the bargain between them had been struck, resumed his cynical mask, and added the element of ice to those of iron and steel. He made Phœbe feel that she might serve him for a year without being alarmed by a

look he could give her or by a word that he could say. So it was best, no doubt; but Phœbe was learning fast to be a woman, and women do not like to be treated as Pygmalion did not treat even a statue of stone.

‘What is my life to mean?’ thought she, when it had been drifting on after this fashion for some time. ‘It can’t mean that I’ve been given thousands of discontents only to sit in a chair and let a painter stare at me as if he’d never seen such a thing before. I dare say my eyes are worth his buying now, as he says so; but that won’t last for ever, unless things are always to be different with me than with other people,’ for, though she had burned her magical books, she had not even yet left off the bad habit of regarding herself as the heroine of a story. ‘I suppose I shall some day get old, if I don’t die, and with nothing good to happen, except the last, in all that while. If I were like other girls I could play, or sing, or dance for my bread. Perhaps it wouldn’t be better in itself than what I’m doing now, but it would make things happen, and people come, and perhaps——’

But she was firm in one thing : she always resolutely cut in two a perhaps that might end in Phil. Some less distinct resolve formed itself in her mind that she might take to saving from her salary while it lasted, and then spend her savings in learning some more enduring and trustworthy accomplishment than that of having eyes. At any rate it would be something to do, and, since she had never really tried to use her brains, she had never discovered that study of any sort will not serve for a mere time-killer. Even Dick's boisterous laughter and clattering boots, despised once by their owner's romantic sister, would have been welcome now.

One wet afternoon, tired with a morning's dreary sitting to no apparent purpose, seeing that her employer was attending to other matters half the time, and much more tired of herself, she mustered courage, invaded the lower regions of the house where she lodged, and found the lady of the house busily engaged over the kitchen fire.

'Mrs. Hughes,' said Phœbe nervously—for what heroine ever asked such question before?—'would you mind giving me a little plain sewing—stockings to darn, or anything

you please? I'm sure you must want help, with all you've got to do.'

'Stockings to darn, Miss Vernon? Why, I never heard of such a thing in all my born days!' exclaimed Mrs. Hughes, who, with her husband, looked up to Esdaile, their patron, with a reverence that they were eager to extend to a young lady with whose rent he had been good enough to honour them. Nor did Phœbe ever know how much, both in money and in words, she owed to Esdaile in this matter. 'Want to darn my stockings—and you a young lady! Never did I ever hear of such a thing before.'

'If you please,' pleaded Phœbe, 'or anything else—if it's anything I can do. But I think I could mend stockings and look over linen best, especially if it wants a great many buttons, and is very much frayed; I had a good deal of that sort of work when I was a girl——'

'And I'd like to know what you call yourself now!' said Mrs. Hughes, with a broad smile in which shone the whole of the kitchen fire. 'Whatever would Mr. Esdaile say to such a thing, I'd like to know?'

'Did you ever in all your life, Mrs.

Hughes, know what it means to have nothing to do ? ’

‘ I don’t know as I did, miss ; but I’d uncommonly like to try.’

‘ Then, please let me try to let you do less. If there’s one thing I love doing better than anything else, it’s darning stockings with very large holes.’

‘ Well, Miss Vernon, tastes do differ, as Mr. Esdaile says to John Hughes. I must own I like them small. But if you really do want to give yourself a treat, miss, I won’t stand in the light, though I sha’n’t have the face to tell Mr. Esdaile.’

‘ I assure you, Mrs. Hughes, he wouldn’t mind,’ said Phœbe a little bitterly ; for he had not asked her a single question about herself from the hour that she consented to become his model. ‘ So please——’

Persuaded, though a little conscience-stricken, Mrs. Hughes left her mutton-chops, and turned over a confused basket of articles of clothing waiting for the needle.

‘ Here’s some with biggish holes to be sure—they belong to the gentleman in the back attic, and a very odd sort of a gentleman too ; scribble, scribble, scribble, all day long, and

not much coming of it, I'm afraid. How his stockings get in such a state, if he don't get the nails in his boots, goodness knows, for he don't walk out so much as you. But, perhaps, Miss Vernon, you mightn't like to look after a strange gentleman's things——'

'So long as it isn't the strange gentleman himself,' said Phœbe, 'I'm sure I don't mind. There, I think I've picked out the worst. I'll carry them straight off into my room, and have a pleasant afternoon.'

'Ah, miss! you'd be a treasure of a wife to a poor man,' said Mrs. Hughes; 'and so, I suppose you'll marry a rich one. It's the way of the world. I ought to have married high, and so I would, if I hadn't married John Hughes. Not but what we don't do pretty well, considering. You're all right, Miss Vernon; it's the gentleman in the attic troubles me. I had a writing gentleman up there once before, who never had his pen out of his hand, though not half so tight in it as this one's, and he owes me three weeks' rent to this day.'

Phœbe was not interested in the strange gentleman. But the prospect of having something to occupy her fingers, and that something

unquestionably useful, proved the continuation of a happy inspiration. Is it quite possible for an amateur seamstress to work upon a stranger's clothes without speculating a little about the wearer, whether he is old or young, and a dozen equally unimportant things? Probably Phoebe, wholesomely occupied, thought for once as others think. But such thoughts merely passed along the surface, and did not give her any real interest in the gentleman who managed, without walking, to wear holes in his stockings large enough to thrust a fair-sized fist through.

The next day chanced to be Sunday. Esdaile was a man who made no distinction between days, and either heedlessly, or else by way of experiment upon the nature of her character and training, omitted to make any in the case of Phoebe. She had received a message to attend the studio at nine o'clock in the morning, and to undergo an hour's minute study of her hands. Indeed by this time Esdaile must have known this by no means too beautiful girl by heart; but the hands were a happy thought; by judicious economy he might contrive to give a week to each finger, and

then he might proceed to a detailed study of her nose. He dismissed her, to her relief, and not improbably to his own, at half-past ten.

It was a most unlikely hour to meet anybody whom she knew. She had certainly never belonged to a church-going family at any period of her career; and least of all had she the faintest expectation of meeting her heroic lover, Stanislas Adrianski, who, if a free man, was doubtless in bed, and, if still in service, down in Lincolnshire helping his master to rise. And yet, coming towards her along the street, she was convinced that she saw Stanislas, and, at the same time, was convinced that he saw her. As to the nature of her thoughts about him, she had given up thinking; as to the nature of her feelings towards him, she was sure. Since her visit at Cautleigh Hall, and even since the renewal of her relationship with Phil, she had seen him with different eyes, and had, in some fashion, contrived to see through him, though without seeing anything very definite on the other side. She would have flown from Phil with all her

speed, while hoping with all her heart to fail, but from Stanislas her instinct was to hide. After all she was not quite sure of its being Stanislas, and did not dare to look a second time. So she let herself be carried away by a current that happened, by good fortune, to be setting through a church door. It was the last place into which she was likely to be followed by friend or foe.

Of course she had been to church with the others at Cautleigh, and, as Sir Charles had noticed, shown a peculiar quickness in picking up the forms with which she had obviously been unacquainted on her first arrival. But what she had heard there had never chanced to touch her inward ear. Even now, having been shown into a seat, she went through the forms of sitting, rising, and kneeling with merely mechanical precision, thinking mainly of whether it had been really Stanislas Adrianski whom she had seen, and if he had really seen her, and if he had followed her. Nor was her attention fairly caught until she heard the words: 'Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land.'

The command seemed to be spoken in mockery. How could she pray to have her heart inclined to honour a shadow—she who had never known the phantom of a mother, and whose father had been represented by one man who had sold her and by another who had bought her; even if her worst fears were unfounded, a pair of slave-dealers, and nothing more? The good people who sat next her must have taken her for some undutiful daughter, tortured by remorse, when she could not restrain a sob that followed words so little likely to call forth a burst of feeling. She stood up at the Creed, but it meant nothing to her—beliefs of any sort were no longer any concern of hers. She sat through the sermon—it told her nothing at all. But presently she heard yet another verse:

‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.’

As soon as she returned home, having met no trouble on the way, she went into the kitchen.

‘I want some more stockings to darn, if you please, Mrs. Hughes,’ said she.

‘Mercy! On a Sunday, Miss Vernon? Have you forgot the lady that sewed on a Sunday, and pricked her finger, and was buried in Westminster Abbey?’

‘I forgot,’ said Phœbe. ‘But something I must do. Have you got a prayer-book in the house, Mrs. Hughes?’

‘Ah, that’s more like. I don’t hold with pleasuring nor working on a Sunday; but with getting your dinner comfortable, and taking a good long nap over your Bible, hold I do.’

So, by yet another chance, Phœbe found some new books over which she could ask herself, as of old, ‘Ah, if all this were true; and for me!’ And, being no sceptic by nature, as her history amply shows, she, though as yet vaguely enough, discovered some things which nobody had ever tried to teach her—not even Phil.

CHAPTER X

AN UNSEEN STORY

HAD it not been for that narrowly-escaped encounter with Stanislas Adrianski—if indeed it were he, and not some less distinguished foreigner of the same illustrious family—it is difficult to know what Phœbe could have done during her career as an artist's model. But to speculate on what people would have done, if something had not happened, is the province of historians and professional biographers. To say that Phœbe found entire content in mending clothes and in sadly ill-regulated theological studies would be absurd; but it would be no less absurd to suppose that she found no comfort in either. This is the hardest period in her adventures to describe. For the first time since she had first met Stanislas, the days went by without bringing events with them, and yet she had never

missed events less, or felt herself less completely alone.

I would linger over those hours, days, weeks of solitude, were I not convinced that the dulllest taste would recoil from such a seemingly empty chronicle. She was still wandering about in a labyrinth, but the thread in her needle was in some sort playing the part of the clue, and she was following it not altogether blindly. Heathen and savage as she was, she could make out one or two leading points without any outer light, such as that it could be nobody's fault but her own if life looked like a general failure, leading to nothing. Of the more serious matters with which her head was growing full, there is nothing to say. She was simply passing through a phase through which most people pass in childhood, before they grow out of such childish and unpractical things for good and all. But the nature and purpose of oneself, and therefore, in a less degree of one's appendage, the universe, is a question of sufficient fascination, while it lasts, to keep dulness away from the asker, though by no means from others. In such a condition of mind, the exact measure of the freedom of the

will can fill up the whole of an unoccupied five minutes at any time, and with this advantage, that the topic is no sooner settled than it is quite ready to open itself all over again. As it happened, Phœbe had rather less genius for speculative theology than for anything else, so that there seemed no reason why she should not be amply provided with thought-food for the rest of her days.

So, at any rate for the present, darning stockings and sewing on buttons sufficed for Phœbe as well as grinding lenses had once been sufficient for the working hours of a somewhat deeper philosopher. Of course she did not mean to live like this all her life long; but she was young, and felt no pressing call to begin to act upon thoughts that were turning into theories. Some sort of plunge would have to be made some day, and meanwhile it was pleasant to sit upon the edge of the shore, and to look out over the sea. Had circumstances forbidden every sort of action, she would no doubt have plunged out at once; but for this, as things were, any time would do, and she had learned to be in no hurry for a change. When she looked out farthest, her stitches formed a web something in this wise. She

would never marry—that was certain. Nobody would ever want her, and if any man should, he must be told to look elsewhere. Not even Stanislas Adrianski, should he claim her, as the saviour of Poland, at the head of a victorious army, should be allowed henceforth to bring the romance of a hero and heroine to its rightful ending. That old dream—she knew not why—was as dead as the old bay-tree, which must now, divorced from its only poet, be dead indeed. Not even Phil Nelson—but that had never been part of her story, and was his no more. She must live for others, if they would let her; for strangers, if she could find any in need of such incapable fingers as hers. Then the stitches would follow one another faster, and the new thoughts would begin to show themselves unable to root out, if not the old dreams, yet the old way of dreaming. She had read, even in her old books, of saintly women who had played such subordinate parts as mothers and confidantes of heroes and heroines, and had given them a sort of languid liking, as having no concern with one who was to be nothing less than the full heroine of her own story. But these had always been represented as

having had their stories, just as she must now come to the conclusion that she had had hers, and it was among the played-out, third-rate characters that she must now look for her types and companions. A nun with a turn for nursing was not any longer an unattractive character, and would have plenty of time for contemplation as well as of opportunity for action. Fancy put in a stitch, and suggested a dim picture of Phil Nelson, say, stretched on a hospital bed, and opening his eyes, after a long swoon, upon the face of a nun in whom he recognised the foster-sister for whom he had once professed to care, and with whom all thoughts of love and hate were alike dead and buried. But that was only an ornamental flourish upon a picture which was otherwise studiously plain and sombre. One real thing Phœbe had once really known a little: that none are so poor as to be unable to say, 'I will help those who are still poorer—and I can.' Only—how does one become a nun? For want of knowledge the question was even harder to answer than the old one of 'How does one become a heroine?'

Perhaps the actress in Phœbe was by no means so dead as the vision of Stanislas trium-

phant, or as old as the bay-tree. But the elevation of her heart was, at any rate, as genuine as the mood of inspiration which had once transformed her from Phœbe Doyle into Olivia Vernon. Had she become—as might have happened—the great actress of her dreams, she would by no means have been safe from some season of enthusiasm when her laurels would have seemed vain, and when the picture of self-annihilation would have an irresistible charm. If the greatest of women, at the height of their greatness, have not always felt this the most, then my whole reading of human nature is as wrong as Phœbe's. And if a convent or any sort of sisterhood had been at hand, and open to receive her, the enthusiasm would have lasted long enough to carry her in, and to keep her there until her wings should have time to grow again.

In the matter of this desire she might have taken Esdaile into her confidence; but she had never yet put a desire into words, and, even if the present strength of her wish had not made her especially shy, her employer's increasing coldness of manner was enough to freeze her words. But she kept

hanging about the subject ; and, while turning over fresh supplies of linen from the wash, asked Mrs. Hughes :

‘ Did you ever happen to know a nun ? ’

‘ A what, Miss Vernon ? Oh, I know what you mean ; one of those poor mistaken creatures that they brick up in a wall with bread and water, and cut off their hair. Where I come from, down in the country, they used to find their bones, but I never saw one alive. I don’t suppose I should be alive very long myself if I was bricked up in a wall ; there ought to be a law made against such doings. Not that one need be bricked up in a wall to starve. It’s my belief that if a man doesn’t eat enough to keep body and soul together, they’ll find his bones somewhere before very long.’

Phœbe remembered the story, in one of her books, of a nun who had been buried alive. But then that had happened in a foreign country and a long time ago, and her old books had lost her confidence now. So the risk of meeting with the doom of Sister Serafina at the hands of the Inquisitor-General of the Jesuits did not prevent her from noticing that Mrs. Hughes had been referring to some

case of insufficient nourishment within her own knowledge.

‘Has Mr. Hughes lost his appetite?’ asked Phœbe. ‘Isn’t he well?’

‘John Hughes? John Hughes, Miss Vernon, does lose lots of things—there’s his temper, and his wits, and my time, and, when he was young, more situations than a dozen men would have the chance of keeping; but never his appetite—never for an hour. Bless your heart alive, miss, he cuts, and he comes again. It’s the front attic that’s sitting heavy on my mind.’

No doubt it is quite possible for a seamstress by calling to take a purely professional interest in the single gentleman whom she does for. But, when this stocking represents a daydream, and that an attempt to fathom the purpose and end of the universe, and this button despair, and that patch an act of hope and aspiration, it is hardly possible to avoid extending one’s sympathies from the clothes to their wearer. There must needs be a special personality about the unknown attic who wore the webs that Phœbe wove; it seemed scarcely possible but that some subtle influence should not connect him with her, no less than

her with him. So she was more interested in the front attic than if his increasingly ragged raiment had been innocent of her patching and darning.

‘Is he ill?’ asked she, ‘or poor?’

‘It’s sad to think of,’ said Mrs. Hughes, ‘but I’m near driven to think he can’t afford both my rent and his own dinner, and that he’s so unlike the rest of them that he lets the dinner go.’

‘Hasn’t he any friends? But of course not, people never have that want them,’ said Phœbe, arguing from herself to the world at large. ‘And you really believe that he starves?’

‘I don’t know what to think of it,’ said Mrs. Hughes. ‘One day I think one thing, and the next I think another. That’s what makes him on my mind, and what to do I don’t know. Keep a man for nothing I can’t and I won’t; and yet there’s other things I can’t do neither.’

‘Of course not,’ said Phœbe. ‘What sort of a person is he? Is he old? He must be rather large according to his clothes.’

‘Yes, he is big; at least he must have been when those clothes were new. I don’t

suppose he'll see sixty again, and that's a bad time to find oneself at the bottom of the hill.'

Phœbe asked no more questions then. The barest sketch was enough to provide her with a finished picture, to complete at leisure in her own room. The picture she evolved from Mrs. Hughes's rough outlines was a very sad one indeed—that of a lonely old man, too proud to beg, too honest to postpone debt to dinner, and dying by inches of pride and honesty. She remembered also that he was an author, and she had not failed to gather from her books a certain traditional knowledge concerning those who wrote them. Surely there must, at last, be somebody worse off than she, who had two guineas a week, ample leisure, youth still before her—among all her troubles she had never happened to starve.

'It is horrible to think that under the same roof there should be one person growing richer and richer every week, while another should be unable to get his daily bread,' thought she, kept awake in her bed by a new problem. 'When one person hasn't enough, nobody else ought to have more. But what can I do?'

The new question was harder to answer than how to become a nun. It by no means kept her awake all night, but it returned to her at breakfast-time in a way that made her ashamed of having two eggs to eat when probably the attic had no eggs at all. And yet it was impossible to send up an egg to the attic with the compliments of the second floor.

Why should thinking and planning always be so easy—action always so hard? Her philanthropic plans had been blocked up by a plain boiled egg; and yet she felt that if she could not contrive to trample over the obstacle somehow, all her new-found peace would be gone.

Esdaile did not require her services that day—indeed, for some time past, her office had been gradually fading into a sinecure—so that her view of the ordinary relations of painter and model were among the very wildest of all her romances. There was nothing for her but to consult once more with Mrs. Hughes.

But unhappily Mrs. Hughes was in a bad temper that day.

‘I don’t see any call to have a coroner’s

inquest in this house,' said she; 'and that'll be the end of things if they don't change. It's my belief he's not so poverty-stricken as he seems, for he had money last night, and when he'd paid his weekly bill, instead of spending what was over on a good rump-steak, he had a bottle of brandy. And then, instead of drinking that, or even drawing the cork, he threw bottle and all straight out of window into the back garden. He might have killed somebody. And the noise the cats made was as if it was the end of the world.'

'Does he drink much?' asked Phœbe.

'Not a drop, to my knowledge. But better drink than waste,' said Mrs. Hughes. 'He's getting too queer to please me. I'll give him notice to quit before he throws the whole house out of the window, and perhaps suicide and murder to follow. John Hughes does queer things himself, and I've known him throw a bottle out of window too; but then that was an empty one.'

Once more Phœbe fancied she could see the whole picture more clearly than Mrs. Hughes. That waste of good liquor looked like an act of self-conquest, and therefore with the touch of the heroic about it that was cer-

tain to go to her heart even though she had ceased to consider herself a heroine. All that it must have meant to the man himself not even her fancy could comprehend; but she could understand a little. At any rate this front attic could not be altogether like all the other men whom she had known. Phil, for instance, would never have bought the bottle; Phil's father would never have thrown it away. Here was a combination of weakness and strength which, inventing and colouring it as she went along, filled her with pity. 'Old, friendless, penniless, tempted, and starving!' thought she. 'And I can do nothing for him but make his clothes last a little while longer—and not much longer now.'

At last, after a long holiday, she received a summons to attend the studio.

'So you are still at large, Miss Vernon?' asked Esdaile. 'I expected you would have had enough of liberty by this time. Well, since you are here, you shall give me half an hour. Of course I'm not going to trespass upon your confidence, but don't you begin to find liberty a little dull?'

'I'm only too well off,' said she. 'But do

you never paint anything but women? Do you never have to paint old men?’

‘Old men! Why?’

‘Because I know an old man—very old and very poor—who wants help badly; and sitting here made me think that he might take my place for a little while——’

‘Well?’

‘Mr. Hughes could tell you about him. He’s lodging there. I’ve never seen him myself; but I am afraid he has to go for days together without a meal.’

‘Then he certainly ought to make a good anatomical study. No, I don’t happen to want any poor old men; and, as you haven’t seen him, let me tell you, Miss Vernon, that we choose models on the principle of their being useful to us, not of our being useful to them. And London is so full of men very old and very poor that my employing one out of charity would be an obvious injustice to the others, unless I employed them all. He pays his rent, I hope? I shouldn’t like Mrs. Hughes to be done.’

‘Every week, as punctually as Monday comes round. And Mrs. Hughes told me only last night that he has lived on one loaf for

three days. This is London, and a man is allowed to starve !'

'It is a free country, Miss Vernon. If a man chooses to starve himself to feed his landlady, that is his own affair.'

'You mean to say there is nothing to be done ? It is horrible——'

'Think a minute. If the man's like the common run, he'll soon let us all know that he wants help, and how to help him. If he isn't—and that's very possible—he'll avoid help like the plague, and resent it like an insult. So there is a great deal to be done. Wait and see.'

And nothing but worldly wisdom could she get out of Esdaile, who certainly was not the man to commit consciously, deliberately, and without some sort of prudential excuse, any act of charity—at least openly. He soon changed the subject, and then, drifting into his usual silence, kept this very poor old man at bay. But his coldness had for once the effect of adding fuel to Phœbe's zeal, and the suggestion that her fellow-lodger might be starving out of pride as well as out of honesty touched her still more.

The hoard she was accumulating for her

own future use was turning red-hot in its drawer. Wait and see, indeed, how long it takes to degrade a proud man into a beggar! This was the true tragedy—the true injustice of the world, and she could not look back upon her own well-fed troubles for very shame. She passed a great confectioner's, with a view of food enough in the window, and a prospect of more than enough through the door, to make waiting, in such a case, a crime and a sin. She could not wait even to think, and was presently ordering more soup, cutlets, and cakes to be sent to Mrs. Hughes's than one hungry man, however old and poor, could demolish in a day.

‘When you send it,’ said she, drawing out her purse, and calling upon her ever ready fancy to do its duty, ‘please tell whoever opens the door, that it's all right, and—no, you needn't say anything,’ she interrupted herself, feeling that her story was going to be both complex and lame, and struck with what appeared to be the prospect of a really excellent stratagem. ‘Only let it be at the house exactly at two.’

Exactly at two o'clock she was at her window, which commanded an excellent view

of the street in both directions, and it was thus Phoebe, and neither Mrs. Hughes nor Mrs. Hughes's girl, who opened the door to the confectioner's man. Then, when the dishes were safely landed in the passage, she ran down to Mrs. Hughes in the kitchen.

'I have been ordering a dinner for the front attic,' said she ; ' please take it up to him at once, and——'

'Bless my heart!' said Mrs. Hughes, following her upstairs, and gazing at the feast in dismay ; ' am I to take him up that ? Why, what am I to say ? But it don't matter what, he'll send it all flying out of the window——'

'Oh no, not when he sees how good the things look, and you can tell him—anything will do. Say you know for a positive fact the things were ordered for him ; but you've sworn not to tell till he's eaten them all——'

'If it had only been a couple of plain chops ; but one would think you'd been ordering for Queen Victoria. I call that waste, Miss Vernon, and waste's a thing I can't bear to see.'

'Nor I,' said Phoebe ; ' and so I've kept

things from being wasted on people that don't want them. Pray, dear Mrs. Hughes, carry them up—now—before they spoil.'

'To be sure I would, since your money's spent and gone, but I shall only have to bring them down again.'

'Then suppose you say nothing. Lay them down on the table, and say, "These are for you," and walk out again. Or suppose you lay them out, and say you're under orders not to stir from the spot till you've seen him begin.'

'And when he does ask who ordered them——'

'Say anything you like, but don't, for the world, say it's me. Say it was somebody mysterious—unknown. Please, Mrs. Hughes, think how hungry the poor old fellow must be, and all for your sake, Mrs. Hughes.'

'It strikes me, Miss Vernon, if you were as sensible as you're kindly meaning, you'd be a wise young woman, and if you were no more kind meaning than you're sensible, unkind wouldn't be the word for you. Well, I'll be foolish myself for once, it's not so often.'

'Thank you, and I'll help you carry the

things upstairs. Depend upon it, he won't refuse what the fairies and the ravens bring him, though no doubt he would if he thought it came from charity. And that's why you mustn't mention names. It is a long journey. Is this his door? Then I'll run down again.'

It was the most exciting affair in which Phœbe had ever been engaged. Not even when the life of Stanislas Adrianski had been at stake had she forgotten her own self more completely. Would this poor proud old man—for it need not be said that she had given him a very complete personality, not forgetting a more finished mental portrait of him than Esdaile could have painted with the live model before him—would this hungry attic accept the free gifts of the fairies and the ravens, yes or no?

But the answer came more quickly than she hoped or feared. Mrs. Hughes could scarcely have had time to open the attic's door than she stumbled down the stairs, empty-handed, and burst in at Phœbe's.

'Oh, Miss Vernon, I always said he'd do it, and he has done it now.'

'He has thrown them out of window?'

‘Worse than that, he’s thrown poison down his inside!’

‘Poison!’ cried Phœbe, turning faint and cold.

‘I knew how it would be. And the girl’s out, and John Hughes at the studio, and if I go for a doctor——’

‘Go back to him at once, I’ll go for a doctor. Where shall I go?’

‘You’d better take a hansom, miss, and drive straight to Dr. Ronaine, that’s a friend of Mr. Esdaile, and bring him back. Perhaps we’ll get out of an inquest that way.’

‘Yes—where?’

‘Sixteen, Savage Street; not six minutes’ drive.’

Phœbe was out of the house and in a hansom without knowing how, and in less than six minutes, by rare good luck, she had reached the street and the number. She took no heed of the unprofessional surroundings of the doctor’s dwelling, and, having been merely told on what floor he would be found, flew upstairs faster than she had flown down.

‘Dr. Ronaine,’ she cried out, seeing a man

in the middle of a sort of chaos, 'you are wanted instantly.'

'Phœbe !' exclaimed a well-known voice.

The man in the middle of chaos was Phil.

CHAPTER XI

THE DOCTOR'S LITTLE GIRL

PHILIP NELSON looked as if a ghost were visiting him. But to Phœbe, after the first surprise, there was nothing wonderful in finding Phil anywhere. He had taught her to dread his reappearance with the fear that is more like disappointed hope—if one may dare so far fly in the face of words—than hope itself can be. And now that he had found her again she knew in her heart that, until she could again escape from him, she might let herself drift in safety—nay, that Phil must be changed indeed if, he being at hand, the front attic should die.

‘What brings you here?’ said he.

‘Don’t ask me now—I want Dr. Ronaine. A poor man is dying——’

‘Dying—who?’

‘I don’t know—I never thought to find you—but he may be dead——’

'I'm wanted, am I?' said Ronaine from his bedroom, and following his question. 'Here I am.'

'Then oh come at once!' cried Phœbe. 'I have a cab at the door.'

'But wait a bit. What is it? Men die of such lots of things, ye know.'

'Mrs. Hughes thinks it's poison—but I'm afraid he's starved.'

'Mrs. Hughes? I know. Poisoned or starved. Well, they're not quite the same thing, but the alternative's something. Just wait a minute. . . . There—now I'm your man. Where are you coming, Nelson? You're not coming too?'

'Yes, I am,' said Phil.

He did not look at Phœbe, but he made her feel that he was once more taking command of her. It was not quite as she felt, but she was right in thinking that he did not mean to let her out of his sight till he had learned a little more. He had meant never to see her again; but the very nature of her errand made it possible that chance might have given him one more chance of helping her after all.

'Are ye mad?' asked Ronaine in a tone

that was meant for a whisper, as they came downstairs. 'It's broad daylight—and if it's poison there'll be the police about, as sure as, if it's starvation, there'll be nobody at all. And when everything's just smooth for your getting out of the country—it's like jumping into the jaws of a crocodile.'

'I'm not likely,' said Phil, 'to jump in too far. You may want another pair of hands. I'm coming, anyhow.'

Phœbe heard, but could not understand. Still less could she understand the look that came over his face when, instead of driving to his father's house, the cab drew up in a humble street which he had never seen. Was this where she lived—and did Stanislas Adrianski live there too? And that wild suggestion of poison—had crime been leading to the end of crime? Had he been certain of arrest, he could not have kept away. He had deliberately given in, but Phœbe, to whatever depth she had fallen, was Phœbe still. He could have given up seeing her again, but, seeing her, he could not let her go till he was sure that she had not reached some last depth that would compel him, if he could not otherwise help her, to plunge after

her. At any rate, to pass her by for his own safety's sake was not in him. He could not have done that, even had she not been Phœbe.

The door was opened at once.

'Not too late, Mrs. Hughes?' asked Ronaine.

'He's not gone——'

'Is anybody with him?'

'Not a soul but me.'

'Then take me up at once, and I'll talk as we go. You just wait about,' he said to Phil; 'I'll let you know if ye're wanted.'

And so Phœbe and Philip were left together at the foot of the stairs. She, embarrassed enough, moved slowly up towards her own room.

'Shall I follow you,' asked he, 'or shall I wait here?' He spoke to her as if to a stranger; she had never heard him speak like that to her before. Had he even ceased to be her enemy? That would be worse than merely ceasing to be her friend. If she had no enemy, she had indeed nothing in the world.

'Just as you like,' was all she could say.

'Are you alone here?'

‘Everywhere,’ said Phœbe. ‘And I mean never to be anything else—if I can.’

It was certainly not an invitation, but he followed her. At any rate it meant that he ran no immediate chance of meeting Stanislas Adrianski—beyond that point he saw no significance in her profession of solitude.

‘Then you are living here,’ he said, looking round her room. ‘And you say you do not know the man who has been taken ill?’

‘I have never seen him,’ said she.

‘Then I can speak to you of yourself, once more. But—but what can I say?’

‘I heard something just now—you are going abroad?’

‘Naturally—travel is part of my trade. Phœbe, as I am going to leave England for ever, as I mean never again to see you while we two live—— We have been brother and sister. Tell me the whole of your life—if you can live it you can tell it; you know, at any rate, that I am not likely to say anything when I can do nothing. I have been afraid to look things in the face—but surely it cannot be for nothing that we have met once

more. It will be better to know everything than to know nothing, after all.'

His voice seemed to mean something, but his words to her could have no meaning at all. This was no mere miscomprehension, which words could have prevented or which words could remove. That he was ignorant of one outward circumstance in her life she had no ground to imagine, and while her inner life was all her own, neither in the one nor the other was there cause to address her in such solemn tones, as if she were the heroine of some nameless mystery. He knew even more than others—more than herself; for had not the key to the history of Stanislas Adrianski been in his hands alone?

What could he mean by going away in order that—eyes can see more than ears can hear—he might never see her again?

'I may ask you this; I have the right of a man who once swore to stand by you through good and ill. If I can't do that, I'm not likely to do you harm—or even others, whoever they may be. If you need me, let me know where I can send you my address from time to time, so that you may always know it, and be able to say 'Come.' You

must know as well as I do that this life of yours cannot last for long.'

'But it will—it must.'

'No, Phœbe, it cannot; and it must not, and it shall not!' said Phil, forgetting that he had given in. 'Have you not learned to see the end? Are you so lost that you will not, or so blinded that you cannot see? It may be blindness—father, husband, friends, all in league to use you——'

'Husband?'

'What else? For I won't believe——'

'Philip! what—whom can you mean?'

'What else? Are you not married to Stanislas Adrianski, if not in the sight of men, yet in the sight of——' He could not say 'Heaven,' and there was only one other word.

'To him!' cried Phœbe, hot with something terribly like shame, and yet not shame. 'What has made you dream of such a thing?' She had dreamed of it, but then a dream is a dream. 'I only pray that I may never see him—or any creature whom I have ever seen—again.'

Phœbe did not often speak out, but when she did, when she could act herself with as

much soul and meaning as she had once acted Olivia Vernon, there was no doubting her.

‘Is that true?’ he asked ; but in such wise that his question needed no answer. He, too, was among the creatures whom she prayed never to see again. But that was also his own will, and it therefore mattered little so long as Stanislas Adrianski was included in the same prayer. ‘Phœbe—answer me, as this may be the last time we shall ever meet—is Stanislas Adrianski no more to you—in that way—than I?’

‘Nobody is anything to me in any way—and nobody ever has been, and nobody ever shall be,’ said Phœbe. ‘I don’t know what you mean—I don’t know what anybody else means, and I don’t care. But I know what I mean.’

‘And what do you mean?’

‘Is it not enough that I know?’

‘Which means—which does it mean : that you can’t or that you won’t tell? Only tell me this, and I will ask nothing more. No ; I don’t know what to ask you. Why won’t you tell me all, whatever it is? Do you think that one hair of your head would be in danger from me? Good Heavens! you say

you have nothing; but what have I? I am going out into the world—alone. Let me feel that I have done all I can for you, before I go.'

'You have nothing—you, a man? You have father—brothers—head—arms——'

'I have nothing, Phœbe. But I once had a sister, who used to trust me, I think, though nothing else, and since you have no nearer ties——' He stopped speaking, but not in doubt of her word; had Stanislas been to her anything in the shape of a husband, lawfully or otherwise, she could not have so completely thrown him and his name aside, as mere pieces of life's lumber in general. And yet something to her the man must have been. 'Yes; I know what to ask you now,' said he. 'You say you have no friends. Tell me, for Heaven's sake, if you mean that you have broken away from them, one and all—from Stanislas Adrianski, from my father, from all who have used you and tried their hardest to ruin you; that your only reason for silence is that I might injure not you, but them? Would I betray my own father? Am I on such a level with a Stanislas Adrianski that I would betray—even him? Tell me that, and

I will go gladly ; I shall not have tried to help you in vain.'

'Betray me—betray them? No, Philip. Though your father is chief of all the Robespierres, and though Count Adrianski is being hunted down by the Czar, you have saved the count, and I'm sure you would not bring your own father to the block or to the guillotine.'

She took him by the arm and dragged him, blindfold, into the very centre of that non-existent world which was her home. Or rather he, upon the scent of a gang of robbers, real enough to be desperately thought of in connection with policemen and turnkeys, had been pulled up short by a crazy scarecrow. He had heard of the Associated Robespierres, and, long before the certainty of his father's being what he seemed to be, had only by dint of the most obstinate blindness managed not to suspect him of being a fool, if a harmless one. But any number of counts and crazes would not explain the mysteries of Cautleigh Hall and of Mrs. Urquhart's jewels.

'But you have broken with them—with all?'

'So much, that nobody on earth who

knows me knows even where I am—except you ; and I never meant you to know, any more than they. But, since you do know it—it doesn't matter for the others, because I should not go back ; but I was afraid, when I saw you—till I had seen you—that you were come to take me back to him, and then——'

'To your father—at least, to mine? No, Phœbe ; never again.'

'I mean to that man who bought me like a slave—John Doyle.'

'Doyle! the name of your supposed father, at Sir Charles Bassett's? There is such a man, then, at the bottom of all this mystery? Who is John Doyle?'

'What! Did you not know that your father sold me to a man who pretended to be mine, for four thousand pounds? Has none of the money come to you?'

'My father,' said Philip, 'gave me to understand, in so many words, that you had eloped with Stanislas Adrianski—the man whom I found under the very same roof with you ; to whom I found you giving money secretly, and other things than money ; in whose welfare—he a servant, you a guest—you were taking an interest that reached to

agony ; so great that I—— And now, after talking of Czars and guillotines, you tell me that you, in England, have been sold for a slave, for thousands of pounds, and that I was party to the sale. Is that the story I am to carry away with me ?’

‘You never heard that I had been claimed, as his daughter, by a man called John Doyle ? And your father told you that I had gone away with—— It is impossible, Philip ; if anybody else told me I should not believe.’

‘It’s on me, Phœbe, that the burden of faith seems to lie. But I will try to bear it, if I can. Who is John Doyle ?’

‘I don’t know, unless he’s a slave-merchant. But he is a rich man, from India.’

‘A slave-merchant !’

‘What should he want to buy me for, pretending to be my father, except for a slave ? Philip, I think your father must have spoken falsely so that, since you don’t know it, you might not know. I was forbidden to see or speak to any of you all again. And your father might think you would try to find me out, unless he made you think me—not worth finding’

‘Men do buy girls, but not for daughters. And what has Stanislas Adrianski to do with John Doyle?’

‘Only,’ said Phœbe, ‘that Stanislas was one of the people who had known me, and that he found me out, and that was why I was sent away to Cautleigh Hall.’

‘And Stanislas Adrianski followed you?’

‘Yes. He found out where I was going. Oh, Philip, though I know you never pity anybody, I think if you knew all I went through at Cautleigh Hall, you would pity me. There was hardly an hour when I thought him safe.’

‘From the police? You knew his life then, and yet you trembled for the liberty of this thief?’

‘I do not call an exiled patriot a thief; whatever tyrants call him, he is a hero to me.’

‘A hero, who runs off with ladies’ diamonds, and then says, with Adam: “The woman . . . she gave me.”’

‘That is false!’ cried Phœbe. ‘I hate the man, but that is false all the same. I did give him money to help him.’

‘No, Phœbe, it is true. It was upon him that Mrs. Urquhart’s jewels were found, and it was I who found them there. And it was

you whom he charged with the gift, which means the theft, and it was to me that he made the charge.'

One thing, and one thing only, Phœbe had never doubted, and that was Phil's word. She had never heard of Mrs. Urquhart's share in the missing jewels till now, nor did she take sufficient heed of that important fact in the sigh which broke from her heart, and relieved it of the heaviest weight that had ever lain there—the shame of being unable to give it to the hero of her dream. For, as she had said, she did hate the man, or at least the thought of him; and it is always good to give up hating, and one cannot at once both hate and despise. Yet she dared not look Philip in the face, even though she knew nothing of the price which he had paid for her safety, and had paid, as it now seemed, needlessly and to no end. For she believed him to be judging her as a judge a criminal—as guilty of the unpardonable sin, as she felt he would name it, of dreaming dreams. Had she found the courage to look up, she would have known better; for though he had not light enough to see by, there was at least one silver line of dawn in the sky. What if

he had been guilty of the unpardonable sin of solving a problem wrongly? What if he had been mistaken, all his life, in holding that reason cannot lie? If that were so, he would forgive even himself for the shameful crime of having argued wrongly.

As yet, the silver line was but of hope only. But it was marked enough to make him forget why he was in Phœbe's presence, or how he had come there, until Ronaine came downstairs and into Phœbe's room, looking very grave and very strange. And even Phœbe, to judge from her start, must have scarcely less drifted away in thought from the dying man upstairs.

'He's not dead, if that's what ye mean,' said Ronaine, answering her eyes. 'And as to poison, that's moonshine.'

'It is starvation, then?' asked Phœbe.

'It's odd that a man should starve in the middle of the most elegant luncheon I ever saw. But there's no doubt he does want regular meals, and air, and exercise, and everything; and a regular income more than all.'

'Is he very ill?'

'He's faint and low, and his liver's playing

the very deuce with him,' said the practitioner who was waiting to be run after by duchesses, 'and his brain's overstrained, and there's enough weakness about the heart to be able to stand no nonsense, though it might go on pumping for twenty or thirty years with sense at the handle. But sense, being sense, won't work without pay.'

'What is the poor fellow?' asked Phil. 'Has he no friends?'

'A poor devil of a scribbler,' said Ronaine, in a curiously savage tone; 'and if ye saw him and his room—faith, ye wouldn't ask me if he'd any friends.'

'Nobody has any friends,' said Phœbe. 'Poor old man! What ought we to do?'

'Oh, I'll doctor him! But that's nothing, he'll be wanting more than doctoring; it isn't like a fever, that's meat and drink to a man. I'd see to it myself, but it so happens that everything I make has to go to the fortune of a little girl of mine, and though she's a good little thing, and would lend me ten times what I'd want of her, as she's done more than once already, the fund's too low at the minute to let me have the face to ask her.'

Phœbe went to her writing-desk, and,

without counting the coins, put her whole hoard into the hands of Ronaine.

‘I want to help somebody—anybody,’ said she. ‘Let me, for this once, be your little girl. You will know what he wants; and let me know when this is spent, and you want more.’

‘No, Phœbe,’ said Phil, ‘this must be my affair, not yours——’

‘Phœbe!’ exclaimed Ronaine, staring from her to the silver and gold. ‘Phœbe! Why, ye don’t mean to tell me ye’re the girl that my friend Phil Nelson here is breaking his heart over, so that I can’t think of typhus without thinking of you? Faith, when the typhus got into his head, and his brains into his tongue, it was Phœbe—Phœbe—till I was mad with the very name. Well, ’tis a little world; much too little for me; but, anyhow, whatever your name is, yourself’s as good as gold,’ said he, regarding the contents of his hand with half-admiring, half-wistful eyes. ‘Faith, I will take it, Miss Phœbe; I’ll put it into the pocket where I don’t put my little girl’s fortune, and I’ll account to ye for every penny I spend. Why, Phil, what are ye looking at me for that way, as if I was a house on

fire and you wanted to swallow me alive? D'ye think I'd mix up *meum* and *tuum*—— Oh, the devil! I didn't mean that, Phil; I'd sooner have cut out my tongue.'

For certainly Phil was looking as fierce as if the accusation of theft had really gone home.

How Phœbe looked, nobody saw. Ronaine was just running after his own tail, without a suspicion that the performance was in the least inconsistent with the tact needful in a physician who thinks the world too small for him, and Phil was as angry with his friend as he had ever been with his enemy. So how Phœbe felt, nobody could guess, not even she.

Not when Ronaine hurried from the room to find Mrs. Hughes, overwhelmed by his unfortunate allusion to Philip's trouble, could they find a word to say. Neither was famous for speech, and now a new cloud, or what seemed like one, had come between them. Perhaps it was not a cloud; but they could not tell. Or if a cloud, it might presently be glorified by sunrise; but then no sunbeam had yet come into view. And before so much as a word could come, Ronaine was back again.

'I've talked to Mrs. Hughes,' said he,

‘and put her in funds. Ye’re safe enough here, Phil, but don’t stay too long, or I’ll be thinking ye’re in the worst trouble. I’m not going straight home, but I’ll be there in an hour, or anyhow not more than three or four. God bless ye, Miss Phœbe, ye’ve put me in mind of my own little girl. She’ll be as like ye as two peas.’

Ronaine did not go straight home, although he did act according to his word by going elsewhere. He went to Esdaile.

‘Dick, my boy,’ said he, ‘the world’s too small to swing a cat in! I’ve got a patient, and it’s that thundering blackguard, poor Jack Doyle.’

‘Starving in a garret,’ said Esdaile. ‘Well, as a man makes his bed——’

‘So he mustn’t be let to lie! So fork out,’ said Ronaine. ‘*You’ve* got no little girl!’

‘No. Have *you*?’

CHAPTER XII.

OMNIA MUTANTUR

SIR CHARLES BASSETT and his son came up to town together, but with very different and even with discordant designs. For once, a father was filled with remorse for having cultivated his son's ideas of honour too nicely. Everything had gone wrong. If that detestable pretender had not happened to see Ralph alone, he might have been dealt with—bought out, crushed out, kicked out, tricked out—but it was too late now. Ralph took a painfully simple view of the case, that right was right, even when it was on the side of a rascal. Nor could Sir Charles controvert the maxim outwardly and in set terms.

But he had not come to town for nothing, nor only that he might keep his eyes on his son's self-destructive proceedings. He knew perfectly well that Ralph was engaged in a search for the hostile heir—a thief, as a forger's

heir had a natural right to be—and he did not suppose that the search would be in vain. He certainly meant that the police should have something to do with the discovery so soon as it was made, but meanwhile his true object in coming to London was to play a hand of cards of which his son need know nothing till the game was won. And, of all persons in the world, it was Mrs. Hassock who had put them into his hands.

‘It is a most extraordinary story,’ said Urquhart; ‘most extraordinary, Bassett, upon my word.’ Sir Charles had taken advantage of some evening engagement of Ralph’s to open the pack before the eyes of one who could advise upon the course of the game both as a lawyer and as a friend. ‘Of course extraordinary stories are the commonest things there are—as nobody in his senses will deny; but the great thing is to put them so that common sense mayn’t take fright—and common sense is the most sensitive of all human faculties. I should like to see the lady myself, before I know what to say.’

‘Mrs. Hassock? It was to see her for yourself that I asked you here. I’ve had her on the premises this hour, ready to be pro-

duced as soon as she was wanted. Shall we have her up now?'

'I think we will. But wait a minute while I go over the case of the other side. Two successive baronets, Sir Mordaunt and his brother, die without a will. The heir-at-law is Rayner Bassett, if alive. He has disappeared for the very obvious reason that he is wanted for forgery. But there's no evidence of his death, in spite of every inquiry made at the proper time—that is to say when Sir Mordaunt's brother died. Of course the absence of evidence that he did die gives no actual presumption that he didn't die. However, there appears a person claiming to be Sir Rayner Bassett, with a story which certainly from his point of view accounts for everything. Nor have all your inquiries, as you tell me, discovered any inconsistent personal antecedents about the man, or thrown the least doubt upon the literal truth of his story, which in itself, considering all the circumstances of the case, and the man's own character, natural and acquired, is perfectly easy to make even a jury comprehend. Of course the burden of proof is on him; but, beyond shaking his claim to be believed on his oath, so far as it may be

unsupported, there's nothing you can disprove or deny. If the man's not Rayner Bassett, he's nobody. That at least seems clear. And his second marriage was valid enough to make this Philip Nelson his heir—that seems clear too.'

'I mustn't have you against me, Urquhart—and that's clear, anyhow.'

'But then comes Mistress Hassock, with her story. And if that's true, Rayner Bassett—not to speak as a lawyer, but as a student of psychology—Rayner Bassett is either no more heir to Cautleigh Hall than I am, or else he's heir to the gallows.'

'Are you ready for the lady now?' asked Sir Charles, with his hand upon the bell.

'Do you mind telling me what you propose to do?'

'About my rights and my son's? Hold to them—hold to them through thick and thin, through right and—— No, I don't mean that, of course, but—strictly. If what I suspect be true, I have a hold upon the man stronger than the knowledge that his son is a thief and he a forger. No; it would not be my duty to make a convict of my own uncle. But it would assuredly be my duty to keep Cautleigh

Hall and the name of Bassett from murderers and thieves. That's why I come to you for advice, because, though you're a lawyer, you understand other things besides law.' He did not add, 'And because I can make you advise me whatever I please,' though that was no small source of the professional success of Mrs. Urquhart's husband. So Urquhart accepted the compliment as paid to his skill in the study of human nature, and bowed.

'But suppose,' he suggested, 'your suspicion is wrong?'

'You—a psychologist! What happens when a young man and a maid are thrown together? What makes a third, without spoiling company?'

'A certain awkwardness,' said Urquhart, 'beyond doubt; but how that will straighten matters I fail to see.'

'Was awkwardness all that came between you and your wife before you married her? Did you never, in the course of your philosophy, come on such a word as "love," Urquhart? Then, if not, and my suspicion be wrong, you have something still left to see and learn.'

'I think we'll have in Mrs. Hassock now,'

said Urquhart a little stiffly. 'But I have never studied what's just moonshine. In my opinion, love is just a non-existent thing?'

'And Mrs. Urquhart?' asked Sir Charles, ringing the bell. 'Does she say the same?'

'Precisely the same,' said he.

'Ask Mrs. Hassock to come upstairs. Mrs. Hassock, this gentleman is a friend of mine, who wishes to hear from your own lips the story that you have told to me. Sit down. Kindly tell him the whole story, from beginning to end, in your own way.'

Mrs. Hassock curtsied with her usual dignity, and took a chair.

'On the contrary, Mrs. Hassock,' said Urquhart, 'you will please to tell your story my way. To begin with—did you ever see me before?'

'Gracious, sir! No!'

'Never in all your life?'

'I beg your pardon, sir, but you were so sudden, you took my breath away. Of course, you're Mr. Urquhart, that was staying with me in Lincolnshire. I hope Mrs. Urquhart is very well?'

'I ask you, Mrs. Hassock, did you

ever see me before you were at Cautleigh Hall?'

'No, sir. Never in all my born days.'

'Then I may tell you that if you make the smallest slip or blunder, or departure from the strictest accuracy in your account of what happened in Gray's Inn Gardens, I shall be able to correct you, for I was there. Do you understand?'

'What, sir! Was you ever a young man like them?'

Urquhart eyed her keenly, from bonnet to boots and up again.

'If I were not aware,' he said, 'of the effects of time, I would ask you, madam, if you were ever a young girl who indulged in unseemly levity with absolutely casual young men, though not with me; and whose development I should never have expected to find in you.'

'Certainly,' said Sir Charles, 'to associate the idea of levity of demeanour with this lady, does seem rather contrary to nature. So never mind, Mrs. Hassock; you see my friend is really paying you a high compliment, amply deserved.'

'Anyhow, sir, as you say,' said Mrs.

Hassock, stiffening and reddening, 'though girls can't be expected to be their grandmothers, it wasn't with you I ever ran giddy. And I should think not,' she added, conscious of having held her own.

'Keep to the point, Mrs. Hassock, if you please. I tell you I remember that girl as if it were yesterday—a foolish, frivolous young thing, and I see you, a staid, and, to all appearance, most respectable person; and I cannot see even so much likeness as a hundred years would fail to destroy. Are you the girl who, from Gray's Inn Gardens, handed a child through a back window of Gray's Inn Square: ay or no?'

'I was,' said she; 'and that I told Sir Charles.'

'When a Bassett,' said Sir Charles, 'can degrade himself to an Uncle Rayner—a gentleman into a vulgar scamp, I don't see why an ordinary enough nurse-girl shouldn't grow up into the model housekeeper. Everybody must have a beginning, Urquhart, and—well, take the identity proved.'

'Admitted, if you like, Bassett; but proved—no. Well, Mrs. Hassock, we admit that you are that girl. Was the child

male or female, Mrs. Hassock, if you please ?'

'It was a female girl.'

'Well, and why did you leave that baby there, among those young men, unclaimed ?'

'I'll tell you the truth, sir ; I may, for 'twas no fault of mine. I was only a girl. I meant to have my joke at the cost of those young men.'

She paused. The idea of Mrs. Hassock's having been, at any period of her existence, a practical jester, must have struck even herself as incredible. But those of us who watch ourselves with the detestable habit of self-consciousness, have no need to reach even so far as forty years old before finding out that what we have been has very little to do with what we are.

If Urquhart had never learned his Rochefoucauld by heart, he was, as a student of human nature, a dunce and impostor, and therein he would have remembered a passage to the effect that at every new stage of life we have to learn the world and ourselves all over again, and if we have learned some trifle of wisdom, throw past experience and self-knowledge clean away. Phœbe could have taught

him better, who had run through a dozen stages in as many months, or fewer. But self-consciousness was not Mrs. Hassock's foible; so she paused, and stared to find herself speaking in a strange language about things that were strange to her, now that she was no longer young, nor frisky, nor fresh, nor thin.

'So I went out into Holborn,' said she at last, 'and had a look at the shops without the baby; and when I went back the gates were shut, and I'd forgot the number in the square.'

'If you were on your oath, Mrs. Hassock,' said Urquhart, 'I would remind you that, at a knock, the gates would have been opened, and that you could have called at every number in the square.'

'I didn't, then.'

'And in the name of common sense, why?'

'Pray answer,' said Sir Charles. 'We have all had our follies. You will have no harm.'

'And it was a folly, but 'twas nothing more. It was a——'

'Out with it, Mrs. Hassock,' said Sir Charles. 'It was a young man.'

‘Lord, sir, however do you know that?’ asked she. ‘I never told you that.’

‘Because, you see, I knew it without having to ask you. Perhaps you can tell me a case of a young woman getting into trouble without the help of a young man.’

‘There, then—I did chance to meet a friend who chanced to be passing Holborn way, and what with one thing and another, time slipped by.’

‘Come, Urquhart,’ said Sir Charles, ‘I don’t think you need press the lady as to why she never came back for the child. I expect she has herself forgotten that she was ever a young woman who, having stayed out too late at night, and having neglected her duty, lost her head, and was afraid to go home. It was all perfectly natural, Mrs. Hassock. Indeed, Urquhart, who has human nature at the tips of his fingers, sees it all, just as if he had himself been that young friend of yours.’

‘May be,’ said Urquhart; ‘but why no steps were taken for the recovery of the child by her natural guardians I fail to perceive. Who were her parents—eh? We must get to the point now.’

‘I will tell you, sir. It’s true enough I

didn't dare to go home, for 'twas my first place, and my mistress was a Bengal tiger—I've lived in Indian families since, so I know their ways. But she wasn't the mother of that child. She was naught but its aunt, and must have been twenty years older than the mother could have been that died when the child was born. But I wasn't so much afraid of what she'd think of the child as of what she'd think of me, and her sending me off home without a character. I should think it's like enough she'd have made a fuss, if it hadn't so happened, as I heard tell a week after, she'd been took with a stroke—'twas the third—and that did for her.'

'Well?'

'It was the young man heard that—John Hassock was his name, that I married after—so he kindly went to the house to see after my things. I was the only servant, and he'd been at work on the premises for the landlord, and when he got my belongings, and brought them back, they got mixed with odds and ends, as things will when you're collecting one person's out from among another's. Of course he couldn't tell for certain which was hers and which was mine, till he'd brought

them to me to see ; so he said everything was mine that he doubted of, and brought them all.'

'Like a good man of business,' said Sir Charles. 'Well?'

'Well, sir, he wasn't far out, for the only things that weren't mine were just odds and ends—mostly parcels of letters and papers tied up with string. He was vexed when he found he'd carried off a pack of rubbish, of no sort of use nor value. But he and a friend had a spell over the letters and things, and he thought better of selling them off for waste paper. His very last words to me was, "You keep to the documents and never let 'em out of your hands. There'll be people after that young one some day, and then they'll be worth a bank-note apiece, or my name's not John." And then he died : and those were his very latest words.'

'And those papers were——'

'Letters and things, and married-lines. John Hassock used to read 'em over every Sunday, thinking how to make 'em come in of use ; but he was taken before he could see his way. And every Sunday afternoon he used to say the same thing, and 'twas always true.

"That baby you lost," said he, "was the child of Sir Mordaunt Bassett, Bart., married as regular as clockwork by the married-lines, though as dark as a lantern. That's the way when a poor girl marries a swell. First he's 'shamed of her, and then sick of her, and he hides her in a hole that he peeps into as little as he can." John Hassock, he used to read the papers, and he knew the ways of the world. "These lines and these letters," said he, "are plain as your face that Sir Mordaunt Bassett, Bart., is lawful father of that blessed child."

'That,' said Urquhart, 'is scarcely for a layman to say. So you have never let these documents out of your hands. Where are they now?'

'In my black reticule, that I never went without a single hour—my reticule that was stole by Miss Doyle. And I say it is hard, just when, being asleep outside a window, I chanced by an accident to hear that child's wanted, the papers to prove it aren't there. But if that Miss Doyle wants to put in her oar, Sir Charles can't deny how 'twas I told him the story first, or how the letters and things are mine, that I've been keeping safe and

honest for this very day. 'Twas Providence put me behind that window ; and 'tis flying against Providence to take and hide my reticule, as if that Miss Doyle was born a magpie.'

'So the long and the short of it is,' said Sir Charles, 'that—if this tale be true, as no doubt Mrs. Hassock believes it to be—the reasons of my cousin Mordaunt's single life and intestacy are pretty clear. No doubt he was entangled and was ashamed of it, and couldn't bring himself to do justice till death put it out of his power. Observe, however, that this girl was Mordaunt Bassett's only child, according to Mrs. Hassock's tale as told to me. The mother died in giving birth to her first-born. And now you see the hold I have on my uncle Rayner. If the girl be alive, and his account of her death (having discovered her identity) a lie, then his claims are at an end. If she be dead—then you know what I believe. An uncle like that, in sole charge of a helpless child who stands in his way, is a dangerous man. The question is, how to find Miss Doyle, for both Jack Doyle and his daughter are missing too. I wish, Urquhart, we had done our duty by that baby better—

you and I. Ralph and she might have been man and wife by now. Look at that sketch, Mrs. Hassock, and see if you see any likeness to anyone. It's a sketch, Urquhart, made by Esdaile, whom Lawrence happens to know, and whom, of late, Ralph, through Lawrence, also knows.'

'That is the baby,' said Mrs. Hassock. 'A trifle older, but the same.'

'You're right; that is the child. And, Urquhart, there is another curious story too. Esdaile is painting about twenty studies of a girl whom he has picked up somewhere on the sole score of her grown-up identity with the subject of that very sketch in Mrs. Hassock's hand. And Lawrence has told Ralph, and Ralph has told me, that the girl is the exact double of Miss Phœbe Doyle. Mrs. Hassock, I am talking to you as well as to my friend. You remember Jack Doyle, Urquhart—a blackguard who would do anything for the price of a glass of brandy. If that child be not dead, she must be concealed. And where would a scamp like Uncle Rayner find a better accomplice, a better tool, than in a blackguard like Jack Doyle? And now, you see, the man and the girl have disappeared,

precisely when Uncle Rayner desires most that not a trace of them should be found.'

'Miss Doyle—from India!'

'Ask Mrs. Urquhart if an Indian girl would never have heard of a rupee. Ask anybody's common sense—ask your own knowledge of human nature—if, accepting the alleged evidence of the letters, the girl whom you knew as Phœbe Doyle be not the child whom we called Marion Burden, and if that child be not Mordaunt Bassett's heir. You shall give me your advice when Mrs. Hassock is gone. Meanwhile, I intend to do right. Nobody shall be able to accuse me of trying to keep even my own for even a day at the expense of the rightful heir. Enough that Rayner Bassett is not, and cannot, and shall not be that heir. Urquhart, I ought to have been appointed that child's father, not he. But henceforth I will be her father, and I am, if she be alive.'

CHAPTER THE LAST

A GALLOP HOME

I

IMAGINE a man who, having reached the end of a solitary career with nothing to show for it but money, has found out, in middle age, that it is not quite too late to make up in some measure for a youth wasted and a manhood thrown away. Then, when it is quite too late for anything but such a hope as this, imagine him, at once and at one blow, deprived of the wealth for which he had slaved, and of the one good thing that his wealth had been able to buy him, so that his life of loneliness had left him poorer than at the beginning, and with no sort of belief save that he had allowed himself to be tricked by a dream. He who can imagine this, sees Jack Doyle.

But even such a picture as this, black

enough though it is, does not represent the whole. He, the least likely of all the six, was the only man among them all who had made his duty to Phœbe a point of honour. For her sake, baby as she then was, he had transformed himself from a gold-waster into a gold-grubber, until not his mere habits but his very nature had changed. How much this had been the case he learned when he came home, a homeless man, with his fortune made, but with no creature, not even himself, upon whom he could contrive to spend the tithe. Then he had found her under conditions that filled him with a sort of craving pity—of pity for her, of craving for the shadow of home-love that he could, in her person, buy with his gold. He had learned to think for her and to plan for her, and to spend for her, and to look for her presence in his life until he had learned to love his duty—nay, even to love the girl deeply enough to dream of being her father no more. And then, as soon as his wealth took wings, she also had vanished, betraying his whole life for the sake of a Stanislas Adrianski. She had even meanly betrayed it, by means of lies and stratagems worthy alone of the vulgarest

of stage heroines. For neither fiction nor plays retained illusions for Jack Doyle, who had tried his hand at producing them.

Yet it was himself that he blamed rather than her. What else could be expected of a girl so brought up—what right had he, at his time of life, to complain of one who owed him nothing, not even filial obedience, not even gratitude for a fatherly care that had shown itself in nothing more profitable than the despatch of a few pounds four times a year? But self-blame is the least comforting of all. With nothing left to live for, old habits returned again, and he gave up the life that had begun the game by giving up him. Not step by step, but by a deliberate downward plunge, he became Jack Doyle, the archdeacon, once more.

So nearly, at least, as a man of more than middle age, who has become saturated with solitude and sobriety, can return to the ghosts whom he knew when he was young. He could toss all he had to his creditors; he could go and live in an attic; he could keep his fellow-creatures at arm's length; he could easily recur to an indifference concerning sleep, food, and fresh air. He could even

resume his pen. But he could not recover the savage strength which had made all these easy, nor could he all at once recover the hunger for the false strength which can aid nature for a little while. Many a man who has left Bohemia behind him is followed by a hunger for its delights; but he who returns has never been known to find a trace of them. An old Bohemian sees the land without its glamour, and makes no new friends. He can make himself a butt or a bore—unless he have the wisdom to creep into a corner and die alone.

Jack Doyle wrote for his bread, and obtained it—or at least the crust of it—now and then. At last there fell upon him, not the temptation, but the determination to drink the hopelessness out of him; but the temptation to resist his own will proved the stronger, and he threw the last promise of comfort away. Of course he was weak, but I do not know that he had ever shown himself particularly strong, since the days of Stella. He had plenty of muscle, and had been true to a bargain, and he had a contempt for dreams, and for waking weaknesses even more. Nevertheless, with more than all this, it is hard,

when old age is creeping into sight, to begin to be heroically strong.

‘Especially when a man lives on carbonic acid and nothing beside,’ said Ronaine to Philip, who had not even yet set sail. ‘And that’s what happens when you shut yourself up, day and night, in the same four walls. If ye don’t take care, that’s what’ll happen to you—I mean if ye’re not more careful to stay at home. Ye mayn’t meet anybody to-day, nor to-morrow, nor the next day, but ye’re sure to at last, with the way ye go about now.’

‘I shall soon be gone. But I wish you’d tell me one thing, Ronaine. Why do you persist in standing by a thief as if he were an honest man?’

‘Faith, then, I suppose it’s because I’ve got nothing to lose. But I don’t call ye names, my boy, because ye’ve got once into trouble. Maybe I’d have got into the same myself, for I’m not the man to be better than you. And if I did, and ye didn’t stand by me through thick and thin, I’d knock ye down. But does she know of your trouble—that little girl?’

‘You’re a good fellow, Ronaine. No, I can’t go off and let you think me a thief,

though all the rest of the world may, and welcome; they're nothing to me. Will you believe me when I tell you that when I accused myself of theft I lied, and not ask me why?'

'Believe it? I'd believe ye if ye told me that I'm a fool—I should say a wise man—but it's all the same, and ye know what I mean. And thank ye, Phil, though I'm sorry; there's not half the fun in standing by a man that isn't down.'

'But I am down as much as you please. How is your patient at Mrs. Hughes'?'

'What, Jack Doyle? Thanks to me and Miss Phœbe, he'll pull round this time. But what the devil do ye mean by asking me? Hasn't she a tongue?'

Doyle!

Phœbe had denied, and with the fullest air of truth, all knowledge of the man, even his name, about which it seemed to strike nobody to inquire. It might be but a coincidence after all. Doyle is not a strikingly uncommon name. Yet her interest in him had seemed strangely keen and strong. Could it be the man who held the key to the whole mystery,

who was lying ill at the house where Phœbe appeared to be living alone?

He had not ventured to see Phœbe since their unlooked-for meeting, when Ronaine's open speaking told her what Phil had meant to bury in his own heart for ever, and most of all from her whom it concerned. Now, however, he must see her again, for if he had been his own confessor, he would have known that he had been hanging needlessly about London, and running within an ace of losing his passage-money, simply because he could not bear to leave behind him a doubt concerning his first love that could be solved. Silence may be indeed golden, but it is sadly apt to be base gold.

So, arming himself with a triple armour of stern reserve, that his coming interview with Phœbe might be distinctly final, Philip bent his steps to the house of Mrs. Hughes once more. And scarce had he entered the Strand when Ronaine's warning about the certainty of finding an acquaintance in the streets, if one fails to keep out of them, proved a prophecy.

‘Mr. Nelson!’ exclaimed a familiar voice, ‘I have been searching for news of you

all over the world, and the first moment you have been out of my mind I tumble over you,' and Ralph Bassett held out his hand.

‘Mr. Bassett!’

‘Yes. I suppose you remember that you are in no danger from me. Nor do I believe that any human being, unless it be Mrs. Urquhart, thinks you worse than a lunatic at large. But it’s not about that I—my father and I—are searching for you high and low. Don’t you know why?’

‘I cannot imagine. But indeed, Mr. Bassett, you can have no need of me. I have cut myself adrift from my own people——’

‘That,’ said Ralph, with the most thorough failure to speak lightly; ‘that you cannot do. Then you do not know? Has not your father——’

‘I have not seen my father since I escaped from Cautleigh Hall, except once, when we parted, never, I suppose, to meet again. I know nothing of what you mean.’

‘You do not know that you are my cousin—you have never known?’

‘I suppose I ought to feel surprised,’ said Phil bitterly; ‘but—well, if I am to have

another kinsman, I am glad he is an honest man.'

'On my honour, Philip Bassett, a saint would knock you down. You do not know that your own father is at this moment claiming to be Sir Rayner Bassett, of Cautleigh Hall?'

'Good Heaven! Mr. Bassett, is this true?'

'Most decidedly true!'

'What can I say? It is impossible! My father—I must see him. This must not go on.'

'Why not?'

'Don't ask me. My father—gets strange ideas.' Which meant, 'My father is a liar and a knave—a possible receiver of stolen goods; a very probable misuser of evidence that might enable him to prove a false identity.'

'Of course it's a strange idea. But our lawyers, I believe—certainly my father and I—have gone through the whole matter; we have seen your father and his advisers, and I'm afraid—no, I won't say afraid—that the idea is not only strange, but true. Go into it for yourself and see. . . . Now I can't pretend that this is not a tremendous knock-down

blow to my father and me. That you, of course, understand. But we're not the people who don't get up again. We shall propose a friendly arrangement, by which my father shall not be called upon to account for mesne profits, and shall not be left without an income, we to give up possession without trouble or expense to you. I'm all right; I've got a profession, and I'll take off my coat, roll up my sleeves, and show Urquhart that if the tortoise beat the hare once he'll never do it again. And all that comes to this: it's not your fault that you're your father's son, and must have what I thought was mine. We're cousins, and we must be friends. I gave you my hand once—give me yours now.'

'If this be true—— Mr. Bassett, I just now told a man that he was the best fellow on earth because, believing me a thief, he stood by me all the same. And he is the best bar one—the man who not only stood by me, but believed in me. I don't know why my father should be Sir Rayner Bassett; I know nothing; I understand nothing; perhaps I am in a dream, but I understand this—that I should be worse than a thief if I injured you!'

'Heroical balderdash! What injury is

there to me in your taking your own? Besides, that is your father's—my uncle Rayner's—affair, not yours.'

'It's my affair. My father will act for himself. You will tell me presently what this means. But my father will not live for ever—nor yours. I suppose nobody cares about being a "Sir," or any such nonsense; and for the rest, I shall be able to do what I like with my own. . . . But tell me the story first, and then I shall know where I am.'

Philip Nelson—or rather, Philip Bassett—did indeed feel like a man in a dream. That story contradicted nothing that he knew of his father—which was originally next to nothing—and, being so frankly admitted by the supposed heir, must needs be true. Being true, it was the heaviest burden, but one, that he had ever had to bear. And if any wiseacre asserts that no man in his senses could possibly object with all his heart and soul to the rightful acquisition of a baronetcy, accompanied with many thousands a year, then I tell that wiseacre that he stands self-convicted of the most consummate ignorance of the world—of being a poor simple creature who

knows the ins and outs of his own brainpan, and nothing more.

Ralph, though not too worldly-wise, was not such an ignoramus as that, and he could almost understand his cousin's temptation; but it was no occasion for a battle of wills as to which should compel the other to win.

'Won't you come and see my father?' said he.

'I—the thief who robbed his guests of their jewellery? I'm afraid I haven't impudence enough for that.'

'Oh, hang the jewels! But—well, I suppose you can't very well meet my father as a cousin till that outrageous affair is explained. Of course I know perfectly well that whatever you did was to screen a woman, who, I suppose, was Miss Doyle, though why you should want to get her out of a mess, or how you came to know she was in one, or what sort of mess it could be, goes beyond my power of guessing.'

'Only one thing I want to ask of any man—to let things alone. I shall not see your father, either now or ever. When I have seen my own I am going abroad.'

‘You are a desperately uncomfortable sort of a cousin; but I suppose you have no objection to our meeting again?’

‘If you care to call on me. Indeed, I am not such an ill-conditioned ruffian as I’m afraid I must seem to you. But I want time to think—to turn round. Yes—I must see you once more. This is where you will find me, any time before Thursday. After Thursday I shall be gone.’

Stranger things have happened than that a man should unexpectedly find himself heir to a fortune and title, with which he had never imagined himself to have the most distant connection. But that he would never call himself Sir Philip Bassett, or live at Cautleigh, or deprive the actual Bassetts of a penny, he was resolved. In time the estates would come to him, and with them the power of will-making and of disappearing in such wise that all concerned would think him dead with more certainty than had been the case with Uncle Rayner. Nor was it wholly a passionate gratitude towards his cousin Ralph that induced so unromantic a person to imagine a romance for himself, thorough-going enough to have satisfied Phœbe herself in her wildest

hours. What use would title and fortune be to him, a confessed thief, who would never marry? Better to work for his bread in his own calling than drag out a disgraced and meaningless existence at Cautleigh Hall. Cautleigh was Ralph's by higher rights than those of accident of birth—by the rights of fitness, and even of a natural justice above the very wisest of human laws.

So he looked forward to as painful an interview with his father as could take place between father and son—an interview in which he would have to oppose the interests of his father, of himself, and to some extent of his brothers, in such wise that he would seem to be opposing them unjustly. But first he had to get his last interview with Phœbe well over before he could give his whole attention to more serious affairs.

He found her, as he expected, at home. She should, he thought, have been surprised at his reappearance; he could not tell that his appearance anywhere was the last thing that could ever give her surprise. And it was he who was by far the more constrained and confused. A change appeared to have come over her since their last meeting, though

its nature was not to be read—at least with blind eyes.

‘I suppose,’ said he, ‘you did not expect to see me again. I should not have come only to repeat a good-bye; but I have one more question—I hope you will think it a strange one. What is the name of the man to whom you called Ronaine?’

‘Perhaps — I suppose — Mrs. Hughes knows.’

‘Then you do not know? He is a stranger to you?’

‘And a neighbour,’ quoting from her latest reading. ‘I never thought of his having a name.’

‘I asked you because—because I have heard his name is Doyle.’

‘Doyle! But no—it can’t be the same. The Doyle I know doesn’t starve. He is a very rich man.’

‘Phœbe, you make me believe you. I will see the man before I go. Rich men do starve sometimes; but you could not speak like that and look like that if you were still afraid of my knowing all that you know. Yes, I believe you meant what you said, with all your heart, when you begged me not to

betray you to Doyle. What are your plans ?'

'Oh, I shall find a way to earn my bread ; I have only myself to keep, you see ; and I don't want much, except more knowledge of what things mean. I have learned so much that I want to know more.'

'You are alone—quite alone ?'

'Quite alone. But never mind—alone is the best thing anybody can be.'

'Perhaps—well, I suppose so.'

Neither this, nor anything else, was what he meant to say. His heart was in a ferment of conflicting feelings. So long as she was pure—and he could no longer doubt that—what did Phœbe's past matter to him ? By one road or another, both had reached the self-same place ; their paths had met in a desert. Why should two lonely travellers part again ? In as many guises and disguises as there are mortals can love come—in as many as are the passions that can put on love's disguise.

'Phœbe, it is not good for you to be alone. Come with me,' said he.

It was no mere love-making, as Phœbe

well knew. If Phil still mistook love for duty, she no longer mistook love for fear. Why, if in her utmost panic, when flying from herself and from all who knew her, Philip had laid his hand upon her, and said 'Come,' she would have come, though in the manner of one compelled by an overmastering spell. But a whole volume of life had been thrown open at once by those unthinking words of Ronaine. She had been loved truly, after all—the leaden binding had concealed the golden lines. The story of the past would keep; they knew one another now. And this was how Philip Nelson said good-bye, with his eyes looking down into those of the girl who, with a thankful heart, gave herself back into a master's hands, to wander and to dream no more. For reality had come, and the old bay-tree in the back-garden shed its last leaf and died.

II

'Some gentlemen to see you, miss,' exclaimed Mrs. Hughes, all in a flurry, for Miss Vernon's visitors might have been angels, so few they were.

Yesterday Phoebe would have glanced at

the window and wondered whether the supreme need for flight makes wings grow. To-day she had no fear. Phil, on leaving her before meeting her again for ever, had carried out his intention of making the acquaintance of the convalescent upstairs. But had he been a hundred leagues away, instead of under the same roof, she was no longer either alone nor in a dream of her own creating. So she did not even ask for her callers' cards. She did not even start when she recognised in Sir Charles Bassett her ex-gaoler of Cautleigh Hall—not even when she saw that he was accompanied by her ex-father, the admiral. She had no means of knowing how singular such companionship would look in other eyes.

‘Why, bless my soul, it’s Phœbe!’ cried Sir Rayner, standing stock-still just within the door, open-mouthed. Phœbe rose, and thought of sending upstairs for Phil.

‘I am delighted, Miss Doyle,’ said Sir Charles, holding out his hand, ‘to have found you at home. You are living independently, I hear. But I’m afraid I mustn’t pretend to have sought you out simply for the sake of giving myself the pleasure of a call. In fact,

it is on business—business in which Mr. Nelson——’

‘Sir Rayner——’ began the admiral; but the least objectionable side of him appeared to be uppermost in him at present, namely, the fool’s side.

‘At any rate this gentleman is deeply concerned as well as I. There is a certain question that you can answer, and none but you; and, as it is a matter for a family conclave, I took the liberty of making an appointment with Mr.—this gentleman—at your lodgings; you will certainly pardon me when you know the reason. If you only knew the pains I have been at to find you. But to my story, which begins with a black bag lost by Mrs. Hassock on a railway journey. She fancied that you had it and refused to return it. Of course it went to the lost luggage office at the terminus, whence I recovered it yesterday. I have examined the contents, and I now place them in your hands. They are yours.’

Phœbe stared at the packet of documents, at last surprised. ‘Mine! I never saw them in my life before.’

‘I must no longer call you Miss Doyle, or even Miss Burden,’ said Sir Charles. ‘When

Mr.—this gentleman has perused these letters, bringing his legal knowledge to bear fully upon them, he will perceive that you are Miss Alice Bassett, of Cautleigh Hall.'

She took no heed of the addition of Alice to her array of christian-names now nearly as long as a Spanish Infanta's. The moment she had been dreaming of all her days was come; she was declared a romantically lost and recovered heiress, of lofty lineage, and large fortune. Not often is such a dream as that so literally fulfilled. Yet it was the fulfilment that felt like the dream. 'I—I don't know what this means,' she faltered. 'I—I must ask Phil. He will understand.'

'Phil?' asked Sir Charles.

'Philip Nelson,' said she. 'He is here.'

Uncle Rayner recovering his wits, took the papers from her hands without her noticing that they were gone, and began to examine them—first upside down, and then in the ordinary way.

'Philip Nelson!' Sir Charles exclaimed. 'What have you to do with him?'

'I—I am to be his wife,' said Phœbe. It was something to have at least one thing real to hold by in the whirl.

Uncle Rayner opened both his mouth and his eyes.

‘You—you are going to marry Phil?’ he cried, with an abstract of the contents of the bag, prepared by Sir Charles, only too well fixed in his mind. I do not think him capable of murder; but still Phœbe had been the safer for Uncle Rayner’s ignorance that the girl whom he had brought up was a viper, who would some day turn round and sting him out of his claims. And why, why since she was to be Phil’s wife, had not the marriage been got over before the heiress knew of her rights and could keep them in her own hands? The old gentleman’s hopes were fading one by one. Yet there might be comfort still; he was still the baronet, and would be at least the honoured grandfather of the future owners of Cautleigh Hall.

‘No,’ said Sir Charles, ‘I am Miss Bassett’s natural protector. And she is probably not aware of the true character of him and of you. . . . Not for one moment will Miss Bassett of Cautleigh Hall dream of marrying with your branch of the family, that you must clearly perceive.’ In his zeal for Ralph, Sir Charles had forgotten to speak with his

usual care. But this new notion, which had taken him aback, would be absolute ruin, and must be crushed in the beginning. 'Cousin Alice,' said he, 'this Philip, who it seems I have to call cousin too, is missing, and cannot be found, though it seems he has been in communication with you. Has he told you why he has never been near his employers since he was at Cautleigh Hall?'

'He is going abroad.'

'Has he told you why he is going abroad?'

'No. He knows.'

'I am sorry to scatter a girl's fancy,' said Sir Charles. 'But the sharper the touch, the sooner over. Mr. Nelson, at least, will not be surprised to hear that his son has confessed to the theft of the jewels lost at Cautleigh Hall—which were not yours alone—and that that is why he hides and flies. Yes, Mr. Nelson—or Mr. Bassett, if you please—not only does your claim fail, but your son dares not attempt to patch up matters by a marriage with the heiress. Your son shall not be followed; but my cousin will come with me to her home.'

'A thief! Philip a thief!' cried Phœbe.

‘I know nothing else—I want to know nothing ; but if he is a thief, then thieves are better than honest men, and I will not give up a thief for all the money in the world. Ah, I see it all now ! He thought me a thief—or worse—and—— But you would not understand. If he loses his rights because of me, I will lose them too. I don’t care who keeps Cautleigh Hall. But I do care for—for being true to one who has nothing left but—me. No ; I will not go to any more of my homes. I am going with him.’

So the plays and the novels had not been such liars after all. The wise men about her were bewildered with an outburst that at last had brought real and romantic love into one.

But there were others who had heard it than these two, and Philip, entering at the moment, went to her and took her hand. ‘That is right, Phœbe !’ said he. ‘Let my father be the last baronet, if he will. You shall do what you like with your own, and what you like to do will be to settle upon my father what I think fair, and to leave the Hall, and Cautleigh, and its income, in the hands of the father of Ralph Bassett, my cousin and friend. Mr. Doyle, here is the girl whom I

made Ronaine allow you to come down all those stairs to see. All will soon be explained now, but I don't think that Mr. Doyle, and you, Phœbe, need wait for everything to be explained.'

'Phœbe,' said Doyle, 'for Phœbe you must always be to me, I have been an unfortunate old fool. Mr. Nelson and I have, between us, managed to make out most things. And I throw myself on your charity. You must find room in your ship for me, and in your home for a few years. My earning days are not gone.'

'In our ship and our home? Phœbe, you will find room in your heart for one—the only one—who, when even I left you, and when none had ever helped you, did his best to be your father indeed.'

'I shall know all in time,' said Phœbe, searching for a clue. But she found it. 'Since you tell me it will be shown to be all right, Phil, I won't wait—I will be Jack Doyle's Daughter now!'

'And Ulick Ronaine's,' said the doctor, 'and his heiress, for after all there's not one of your fathers that's done for you as much as I.'

And that was true. By Ronaine's hands Phœbe's fortune had been made.

Need I explain everything all over again? That Rayner Bassett, otherwise the admiral, became reconciled with the Robespierres, by whom he was known as 'the bart.' to his death, is recorded in the secret register of the society. That the owners of Cautleigh Hall need remain long without a newly created baronetcy not to be publicly distinguished from the old, stands to reason. That Philip Bassett and Phœbe Alice Marion Eve Psyche Zenobia Dulcibella Jane, his wife, long ago reached fame and fortune, and that she has always contrived to make romance and reality harmonise with the utmost ease, is known to many; but that Jack Doyle found in them not only a daughter but a son into the bargain is wholly known to him alone—just as to Ronaine alone is known how he still exists, not unhappily, though without patients, and without having yet made the fortune that he has left to Phœbe, or rather Zenobia, Bassett by his will. I think, for my part, that all has ended well; I know that Jack Doyle's Daughter thinks so too.

This story contains many morals. But all are too obvious to need pointing, save one.

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THE END

[Feb., 1894.]



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